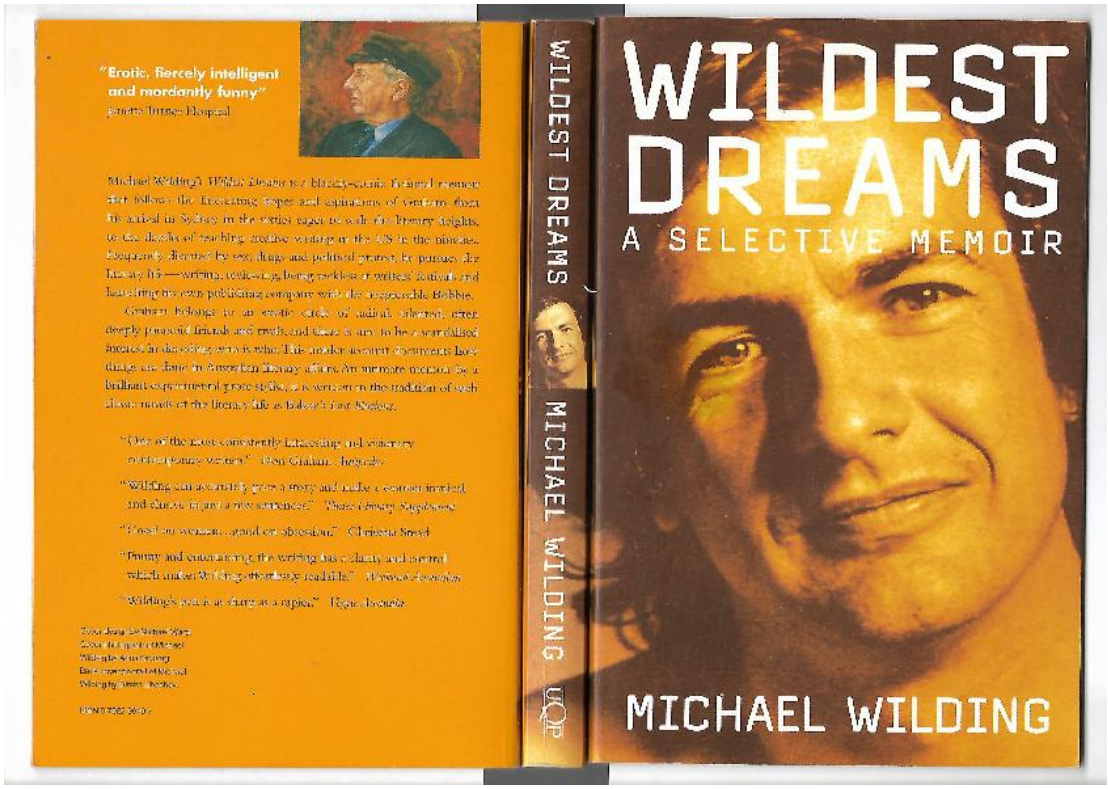

WILDEST DREAMS

A Selective Memoir

Also by Michael Wilding

Milton's Paradise Lost
Cultural Policy in Great Britain (with Michael Green and Richard Hoggart)
Aspects of the Dying Process
Living Together
The Short Story Embassy
The West Midland Underground
Scenic Drive
Marcus Clarke
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WILDEST DREAMS

by

Michael Wilding

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Some of the characters, though not the incidents, have also appeared in previous books. They include Graham, Joe Wendell Holmes, and Gavin Mulgrave in *Aspects of the Dying Process;* Graham and Joe in *The West Midland Underground;* Valda and Joe Wendell Holmes in *The Short Story Embassy;* Dexter and Joe Wendell Holmes in *Scenic Drive;* Lily, and Bobbie in *Pacific Highway;* Lily, Bobbie and Sam in *This is for You;* Sam, Joe Wendell Holmes and Frend in *Reading the Signs;* and Mel in *Under Saturn.*

1: SYDNEY

Graham was booked to sail to Sydney, even bought a dinner jacket, but then couldn't get the official medical examination until after the sailing date, so he flew. He had missed the experience of a passing era, and he was glad. The prospect of six weeks in a dinner jacket appalled him. The captain's table. Shipboard romance. Deck quoits, being dipped on crossing the equator, barbarous games with complex rules and conventions, evenings of bridge or charades or things equally indescribable. He was glad to fly. Surrendering the old world was what he was doing so surrendering the last of those sea voyages was a double surrender, about which he was perfectly happy. But to fly, that was to belong immediately to the new world, the new technology, jetting around the world at the point that jet-setting was part of the iconography of the new: that bleak vision of alienated modernity presented in the European cinema which transported to Oxford had seemed the future to be admired along with all the rest of that early sixties style. And to fly by jet, that was the bliss of a boyhood dream that had observed the steady domination of the jet over the propeller driven piston engine. Seven sectors, five stops, even so, thirty-two hours. He was glad to have missed the propeller driven age, five days in a flying boat, that would have been tedious too. He was delighted they still flew flying boats out of Sydney harbour. He loved to watch them coming in to land at Rose Bay. They were images from that *Chums Annual* of 1927 his father had bought for him when he had been in bed with scarlet fever, a huge repository of stories and images. Flying boats belonged to that world, the security of a past survived, a nostalgia of convalescence. He was glad it was a 707 by which he flew to Australia.

He fell in love with the city, not initially, not with some sudden immediate recognition. It took much longer than that, it was a matter of discovery, of gradual revelation, of slow familiarity. The harbour welcoming there in the golden sun, blue as the clear sky. Just two high-rise blocks, the AMP building at the Quay, and Blue's Point Tower, as indicators of what was to come, single raised fingers of warning, or the invocation of silent complicity. The first time he went over the harbour bridge he didn't know he had done, he was in a train, missed experiencing the experience.

He stayed in a university college and it was hideous, noise, barbarism. Gretel rescued him. She got her boyfriend to drive them round and they started off in Glebe, old decaying rooming houses. It wasn't what he had in mind, it evoked all too fully looking for lodgings in Oxford and he'd left that behind, chosen not to have to live like an impoverished graduate student. Finally she took him to a place in the Cross, a room in an old building in Victoria Street, with a Chinese landlord. 'No night ladies,' his wife said. Again it wasn't what he'd had in mind but he accepted it. Gretel took

him to Newtown and organized a kettle and teapot and saucepan and mugs and instant coffee and deposited him and all of it back in the room, and there he was.

The romance of the rooming house. The bed. The chair. The window on the street, deciduous leaves falling, people passing, no night ladies. Lying on the bed in the early twilight reading *The Red and the Black* in an American paperback edition. He had found the bookshop in the Cross, a deep narrow slot with books ranked up the walls, sometimes stacked on the floor, piled on the central tables, and he would wander up there, look at *London Magazine, Paris Review,* and wonder did he really want to buy them. But *London Magazine, Paris Review* and American paperbacks were the iconography of the hope of literature, of the literary life, not available in the provincial Midlands. These were nervous sorties he made, discovering the delicatessens with their European cheese and salamis, the Austrian cake shops, the Italian cafes where he could sit in the morning sun and jot down notes for the novel he was determined to start without any waste of time, the coffee, the ashtray, the glass topped table, the sun, the heavy smell of gasoline from the buses and cars, the loneliness. The loneliness in the big city, constructing a world around you of familiar structures, desired images, writing the new hieroglyphs of the great adventure, waiting for the connexion with other characters, contacts that would spell out a sound in that silence of the undifferentiated background, a word that might lead to a narrative.

The sun, that was what he always remembered, the sun, the warmth. Yes, there were idyllic, sunny days in England, but so many others were damp and gray. You did not need to be wealthy to be warm in Sydney. He could feel the sun drawing him out as he walked through the Cross in the mornings, the chequered shade of the trees of Macleay Street and Victoria Street, the awnings of Bayswater Road, the fumes of William Street. That gentle morning hosing down the pavements, putting out the produce in front of the shops, some places quietly closed, restaurants not opening till midday, chairs still stacked on tables, clubs, strip clubs, cabarets not opening till night, so it was a morning leisurely bustle that tolerated the refusal of others, that allowed the slugabeds and night owls, that could exist on multiple rhythms, so somebody was always getting up or going to bed and no one cared, no one remarked, no one noticed. He loved it. Except for the loneliness. Yet the loneliness was a part of that tolerance, was the unique way to experience tolerance, no one caring at all when you did anything or didn't, rose and shone or not, no one intruded at all.

It was a scenario and he followed it, wrote about it, read it. In which order ? The model had permeated through so many texts, he could not have cited any specific one at that point, though it was another ten years before he read the archetype, *Lost*

Illusions. But he knew what it was to be the young writer arrived in a metropolis, unknown yet there to be known, the writer's growth the discovery of the metropolis, objective correlative, homology, or only subject. The restaurant in Victoria Street, The Europe, just along from his room; he would eat their regularly, the waiter nodding, smiling in a recognizing yet non-intrusive way, Wiener schnitzel, *The Red and the Black* open beside him, and a pen to jot down notes. There was no special communication with the waiter, just a soon developing familiarity of place, or role Then one evening he took a girl he had met to dinner there. The waiter beamed, pulled out the chair for her, it was like the family, the stooped, near hump-backed cook came out from the kitchen, looked round the door. It was so palpable, they were so glad the lonely young man had a girl, they did everything to make Jan feel at ease, at home, belonging. Old, brown restaurant chairs, the impression of brown wood, door frames, window frames, was there half-panelling ? The waiter's white shirt and black trousers, waiter's uniform but not dapper. An allusion to the dapper, to old Europe, but without the tie on those hot evenings, the leaden heat melting the cold, iron rigidities of the old world, in the end dissolving it all away.

He was glad to have been there at that point, at the softening of the old Europe, at that point where warmth could be elicited by warmth, at the point where the memory of how things mattered still persisted but untyrannically, before it was all dissolved, all forgotten, the old Europe gone, the whole era of dark brown middle European cafes dissolved, bleached in the inexorable increase of the heat.

The typography, the clean, sure sensuality of those days. Not the American paperback of *The Red and the Black,* that was hideous, cramped setting, smudged printing. But *London Magazine* and *Paris Review* had an assurance and clarity and elegance in their presentation, *Paris Review's* covers, single dobs of primary colour, and the space of uncramped margins, the satisfactions of the paper stock, neither shiny nor furry but of a semi-mat texture, bulky, light yet substantial. These worlds of allusion dictated so much of his mental space; at least in retrospect: the readiest icons to respond to recall, detaching themselves from the caves of the past and fluttering, even hurtling, into the space of visual memory, other issues preferring to adhere to the caves' walls, dry and dusty and crumbly, or damp and slimed and greened, or camouflaged, breathless, inert, hoping any beam would pass them by unknowing while the moths of cultural production sought out the limelight.

You could walk from the Cross with its Goodyear sign, the arrow now stationary, no longer allowed to pump through the tyre, walk along Victoria Street past where he lived, and at the end there look down from the huge cliff with its railed walkway at the ships moored in Woolloomooloo Bay, gray naval ships, Bear line cargo ships. It was a maritime city. Commentators came out from old Europe and

remarked on the cities clustered on the coast, the fear of penetrating the inland, as if there were something uniquely bizarre about it. He found he wrote about it himself, borrowed the ready image. But it was only odd if you saw life as starting in the centre of the land and moving slowly outward to the coast. That had been his own pattern. But here, the sea was the medium to which the great ports belonged. And Sydney was on that web of travel.

Again, like the old Europe restaurant, it was coming to an end even as he perceived it. The day of the shipboard novel was over. People still knew the names of the great liners, the regulars between Europe and Australia, the Fairsea, the Fairsky, the Canberra, but that was a knowledge soon to be forgotten as aircraft took over on the passenger routes and the liners became cruise ships. When the first cruise ships began to arrive they were written up in the press, a thousand United States millionaires moored at the Quay. But that too became a thing of the everyday and the unremarked. And the aircraft: you might remark a 707, later you might look out for the arrival of the first 747 Jumbo, alerted by the press, you might recognize an airline insignia, but the days of knowing the name of the individual craft were about to fade. And aircraft landed on land, took you beyond the great ports of entry, whose names began to fade, Southampton, Liverpool, Le Havre, channels of memory silting up.

It remained external to Graham. Ships were things he saw but did not travel on. But they were always there in Sydney, you would constantly come across them moored in the bays and inlets of the harbour, glimpsed at the end of streets, or see the groups of sailors walking along the Rocks or the Quay or the 'Loo, stories of parties on board, of eating dog on the visiting Chinese freighter that ran a restaurant. These were part of the tapestry, the web of allusion against which he was to live.

The ships were always there. Even as the passenger liners disappeared, the container ships arrived. It was always busy, the port of Sydney. And the magic always remained and not only because he had grown up landlocked. The magic was magic whether you grew up inland or on the coast. The low boom of the ship's foghorn in the night, the pilot boats racing out through the Heads, the submarines clustered at Neutral Bay, and Titan, the floating crane, like some glorious celebration of Meccano, and named, personalised, individualised, not an anonymous part of marine activity, but Titan, and he always remembered it, or Lady Hopetoun, that elegant, black, steam powered transporter of dignitaries around the harbour with its distinctive hoot and plume of black coal smoke.

Ferries. A word on ferries. Criss-crossing the harbour. Imagine going to work by ferry, the glistening light of the morning harbour, the saline clarity of the air, the touch of the breath of the Tasman Sea, (not strictly the Pacific Ocean, though you could imagine it as the Pacific and write about it as if it were, how do you demark one

bit of sea from another, how do you demark one bit of land from another, indeed ?) But he made little use of ferries. He lived across the harbour a couple of times, but generally he didn't. It was the city he kept close to. And when he did use the ferries it was the inconvenience that he generally registered in those days. Getting to the wharves, from the wharves. So the ferries were another image of the city, another cosmopolitan or Mediterranean or Asiatic note, that yet played little part in his life then. He would think, ah, the ferry, as he rode the ferry, I must impress these images, this rare and privileged experience of transport. But the great dramas were less of the ferries than of leaving the ferry precipitately, like Slessor's poem he was soon to encounter, 'Five Bells', death of a cartoonist fallen overboard; or the opening of Jack London's *The Sea Wolf,* overboard in San Francisco bay and rescued to a floating paradigm of horror, the spirit of free enterprise. So ferries and falling off ferries played mainly a decorative part, more backdrop, like the cargo vessels.

Transport was by the smoky old Leylands, or could they even have been AECs or Seddons, browning cream and fading green, some ultimate reach of British Raj utilities, fading colours of the forties or earlier, lurching double deckers that gave a scenic drive of the city.

It wasn't a city of secret passageways and narrow alleys. There were some, occasionally he would come across one downtown, but they were not a characteristic of the place. Rather it was an impression of openness that he took away and was glad to take. The medieval pokiness of old Europe was to have its charm when refurbished by the heritage industry. But through the nineteen-fifties it had mainly represented squalor, decay, crumbling buildings, slum conditions.

Nor did Sydney have its outdoor cafes. It was one of the first laments he heard. Why are there no outdoor cafes in Sydney ? Why indeed ? he could only ask. The winds, he was told, it's too windy. The failure of the imagination, the British heritage, was the alternative explanation. To the Australian bourgeois intellectual returned from the grand tour that lack of outdoor cafes was the great colonial repression. But even the cafes were slowly to appear, despite the winds, and the rain, and the lack of wide pavements, as Europe bored with itself pushed out its tourists to Australia. Then there were people to occupy the cafes, people with money and time on their hands, the material base of the European cafes, tourism.

2: BACHELOR WRITING

Graham sat comfortably in the sun in the pub garden. It seemed absurd driving miles out of the city to Newport to sit in a pub garden like any other suburban pub. When they might have been on the beach. But if they'd sat on the beach they could not have drunk so conveniently. So he accepted the situation and enjoyed the sun. It was a weekend school. Adult education. Literature and politics. All worthy causes. He had a sentimental commitment to the idea of the Workers' Educational Association. Though there were not many workers that he could see. There were the professional organizers, like Joe, who had invited him. The middle class wives. The professional cold warriors. He had agreed to give a paper, of course. He agreed to most things. He was hugely vulnerable to invitations and lures and pressures. The most easily raped man she knew, a psychiatrist once called him. She was a friend so he wasn't offended. But he probably wouldn't have been offended whoever had said it. How else to encounter the new ?

He sat in the sun in the garish colour of the garden, surrounded by freckled and skin-cancered beach addicts. He'd only briefly spoken to Joe. He would quite have liked to talk to him, another emergent writer. But the only way to talk to Joe was to go to the pub, round the corner from the WEA, and he had been avoiding the pub to get some work done. He wondered now if that hadn't been a mistake, feeling the pressure off as he sat drinking in the sun there. He let the phrases about politics and literature drift past him and watched the people at the table. He hadn't brought Jan with him. He didn't like her to be there when he was giving a paper. He didn't like her to hear him speaking to an audience. Adrift on those equable seas, he and Jan struck small sparks of comfort, of anger, between them. He dared not move to see where they drifted for fear of upsetting the balance and submerging the fragile craft that bore the typewriter, dipping at the depression of its every key. They passed dark shapes continually, that they told each other were menacing rocks and swamping whales: but they might have been lifeboats, lighthouses, islands rich with native girls and palm tree wine, garlands of flowers, reams of typing paper and ceaseless ever varied sexual encounters.

He wondered if after all this wasn't the better literary life, sitting in that undemanding sun after discussing political fiction set on alien, distant shores, and drinking with this bevy of Joe's girls, past, present and future. It was the life rather than the empty achievement that mattered, surely. He felt the lulling apathy of the surf, the ceaseless withdrawal and return, the timeless sliding of the branches of the

dusty grey, green, blue bush, fluctuating, indeterminate, indistinct. And the sun bleaching it all to a whitened, parched acceptance, like the warm ashes of the moon.

He wondered where Joe collected his string of girls. He found himself watching the current one, Lisa, partly because there was no one he knew especially well to talk to, and partly of course because he found her attractive. Joe was immersed in some speculative arrangement with Dexter, who worked on a girlie magazine. Suddenly she came over and sat next to him and he was embarrassed that, since he had all to obviously been gazing at her, she might challenge him, attack him in some way. She had beautiful white teeth, each just slightly pointed, which must have been very sharp. But they smiled well too. He asked her if she was enjoying the seminar.

'Oh, yes,' she said. And then, as if she sensed he needed something more, 'I enjoyed your paper.' And she smiled at him directly as if to indicate sincerity: or, even if her statement was a lie, to indicate a personal sincerity - the paper was boring but you're all right. She was not interested in analysing the proceedings. She had spoken to establish a conversation, neglected by Joe. Graham talked to her, fascinated by her cultivated, languid manner, her careful elegance. She had the physical attractiveness of the distant, the withdrawn, the disdainful. She was a very bourgeois lady. Joe had this periodic attraction towards bourgeois ladies. She might have seemed out of place there; but her cool, withdrawn, ironic laugh saved her, maintained her distance so that she could not be put in bizarre contrast.

He contrived to sit beside her for the afternoon's paper. She fell asleep and then, waking, kept her head still but her eyes alive, in perfect simulation of someone who had had her eyes closed for concentration. She looked round to see if she had been noticed. Graham smiled, and dropping her pretence she smiled too. They spent the afternoon suppressing laughter as first one and then the other fell half asleep, from boredom, from the sun, from beer. Neither of them heard what the paper was about. At the end Joe had a battery of questions. Lisa pulled faces at Graham as they waited for him to finish.

Afterwards Joe offered them a lift back to town, but they'd already arranged to go with someone else. He was disappointed. 'See you,' he said to Lisa. 'Who knows ?' she said. 'Come down to the pub and have a drink,' Joe said. Graham gave Dexter a lift back instead, woebegone, deprived.

'She's a bitch,' Dexter said, 'she'll destroy Joe, But what can you do ? He goes out of his way to be destroyed. I've never known anyone destroyed more often.'

'I rather liked her,' Graham mildly protested.

'Sure, sure, she's sexy and marvellous and rich and I wouldn't kick her out of my bed. But she's still a bitch.'

'I can't see her ever getting into it,' said Graham. 'Mine,' he added, to avoid seeming offensive.

'Sure,' said Dexter, 'I know what you mean.'

They drove in silence through the still bush.

'Why don't you send us a story ?' said Dexter. 'We need some.'

'Would that help ?'

'Would that what ? Oh, I get you. Could be. I mean, Joe offloads his crap onto us and Joe gets the women. You don't send us stories and - well, it figures.'

'I might,' said Graham. But he had no intention of following Joe into publishing in girlie magazines.

'Here, take a couple of copies,' Dexter pressed, taking them out of his brief case, stuffing them into the shelf beneath the dashboard. 'The birds are O.K. Jeez, though, I'd like to take some pictures of Lisa, hell. That'd give the magazine tone or something. Or something.'

When Graham dropped him off he reminded him again, 'Send us something, we pay reasonable. Bring something down to the pub if you can't make the postage, I'm there most evenings.'

Back home he sat at his typewriter, burned from the unaccustomed sun and having drunk too much in the course of the day to write with any enthusiasm or clarity, he kept reaching down to *Sire* beside him, flicking through the pages. Later, after Jan had come home and gone to bed, he looked through his file of stories for something suitable. He put two aside.

He went round one evening to visit Joe. Angie answered the door. Her hair was a rich raven black, her skin clear, her eyes a deep brown that lit up with liveliness at the arrival of a visitor. She was compulsively gregarious, delighted when people called. She wore a loose black top and jeans that were frayed at the ankles. Her ankles and feet, her arms, her neck and face were warmly suntanned. She radiated a warmth that made clothes seem superfluously draped over her nakedness, the suntanned glow that thrust against clothing, like the soft shoots of plants pushing against protective covers, ready to spread and shoot and flourish fully when the covers are removed.

But she was the only warmth in the room. Al was squatting on the floor listening to the radio. He kept moving from station to station so that there was a constant cross-cutting of music and advertisements, repetitions and incompletions. Joe sat in a chair trying not to glower at him; he sat tense, resisting a forbidden authoritarianism, yet resenting the acoustic intrusion. He ran through silently all the possible ways of asking Al to switch it off, but they all sounded authoritarian,

especially when they purported not to be. In the end he simply said, 'Haven't you had enough of that now ?'

'Not really,' said Al.

'I like it,' said Angie, 'anyway Al's listening to it.'

'I'm just sick of listening to advertising jingles.'

'That's just because you're afraid of the commercial world,' said Al. 'You think the world owes you a living as a writer and you shouldn't have to go out there and peddle your arse.'

Angie brought in another glass from the kitchen. She and Joe and Al were already drinking. Her tongue and lips had the blackberry tint of claret stain. O purple lined palace of sweet sin. Graham sat on a chair by a bookcase and started rifling though the shelves. He found a copy of *Sire* and began to look at it.

'I have to hide it from Joe,' she said, 'that's why it's with those books. Otherwise he spends hours perving over it.'

'What she means,' said Al, 'is that you're perving over it now.'

'He's just looking at the pictures,' said Joe.

She thought it was degrading. She found it insulting to women and she didn't like Dexter who worked on it. She thought Joe shouldn't write for it. She'd ripped off the cover of one of the copies he had a story in, in disgust at the vulgarity of the nude. Joe had been furious. He preserved things he had written in in as mint a condition as he could. 'It's my file copy,' he'd said, 'so just leave things alone in future.' There were these clashes, from the beginning.

Joe didn't seem especially pleased to see Graham, and if he had been pleased when Al had arrived earlier, he showed no signs of it now. He worried whether he had done the right thing in returning to the city or whether he should have stayed down the coast, writing. He still felt uncertainly drawn to Margot whom he'd lived with down there. And he was becoming too close to Angie, a closeness he recognised would lead inevitably to tension and conflict; yet he was unable to prevent it from happening, and would not have wanted to prevent the closeness anyway. He was glad to be back in the city, but the vulturous presence of friends appalled him suddenly. He did not know whether they had come to peck at this food and wine or to peck over Angie. He felt uneasy with her, her glowing vivaciousness. He knew her priorities were not his. Margot had lived subservient to his stories and he felt guilty now about the limitations this had imposed on her, the isolation he had enforced on her. Angie would never subscribe to that; he worried that his necessary withdrawal and isolation in order to write would be threatened by her, or would threaten his relationship with her.

But Graham responded to her outward-goingness, her aliveness. And she responded to his responsiveness. She offered him raspberry pie. It had a tart, acrid odour that excited his taste buds.

'No,' said Joe, 'you're not offering him raspberry pie. That's for my dinner.'

'But you had some at lunch,' she said, 'and Al.'

'I know I did,' he said, 'and I know Al did. But just because you give Al my raspberry pie without asking me you don't have to give it to everyone else.'

Graham could not tell whether Joe's petulancy was real or ironic. It wasn't playful. But he might have been simulating a bitter petulancy ironically; and he might have been simulating a petulancy to disguise the fact that he really was petulant, in order to save his raspberry pie.

'I made it,' said Angie.

'Who bought the raspberries ?' Joe responded.

Al sat gleeful on the floor. 'Jeez,' he said, 'I told you before, we could make a fortune with a TV comedy show with you two. Why don't you write this stuff down instead of all the crap you write.'

'It's not comedy,' said Joe, 'it's a matter of serious principle.'

'Oh, everything's a serious principle with you,' Angie said, 'it's so boring.' She stormed into the kitchen.

Joe relented. 'Bring the pie in,' he called, 'who's for raspberry pie ?'

Al alone accepted. Angie gave him the dish it had been made in and let him eat it, all of it, from that. It had a rich shortcake pastry, and the raspberries had soaked into it. She brought a jug of cream. They sat round watching him, their mouths reflexively salivating. In silence. Angie smiled across the room at Graham. Joe sat thunderous, the lightning striking inwards.

'Beaut,' said Al. 'What else you got ?'

Angie was a lithe, lively, lightly moving creature. She was slim and suntanned and smiled readily. She liked to be happy and was happy to make other people happy. This had been her role as a child and she had tried to carry it through adolescence and she still tried now, though some were unable to distinguish her drive from that of self-destruction and she was not always able to herself. Like so many happy people she was gregarious. She insisted that Joe, who needed little insistence, should go to the pub every night, and at weekends she liked to spend whole days in company, at a pub or on the beach. After the pub, if there wasn't a party, she liked to have people back to talk. Graham used to go back with them often.

Joe accused her of fomenting tensions, creating neurotic situations. And in an environment built on neurotic situations it was as if she had come to feel the need to create them, to demonstrate herself part of the society and to ensure its sustainment. At first she had resented Joe for his externalisation of his neuroses onto her; but then she had come to accept them, realized that they were behaviour patterns for her to adopt to show a participation in the world he projected, this was the key he offered for her entry to the environment he controlled. But how deliberately, she wondered, did he offer it, was he at all aware of what he did ? Or was he rejecting his own disablements and projecting them onto her whom in turn he would reject ? She suspected she was encouraging rejection by not only not denying his projection of these patterns onto her, but by living them out spontaneously, augmenting them by her own invention. She felt she had gained admission at the price of inevitable rejection. But only those truly admitted were ever rejected, rejection was the inevitable culmination of his completed pattern. Only by achieving that would she ever have achieved his full acceptance. She courted disaster like a gazelle precipices.

Her gregariousness tired Joe. It was the constant sideshow of entertainment she required that tired him, not his own cells' wearinesses. He was reduced to a sort of domesticity as he became less companionable. When she asked Graham back after the pub, Joe would begin to retreat to the kitchen and make coffee or tea, or open beer bottles and tidy up the damp newspaper that had wrapped them. Early in the evening he was happy to talk, in the pub. Then Graham and Joe would talk about the literary business, about getting published. When they came to write about it, those days, though, it was the sexual complexities they remembered. At that time you didn't write about writing, this was before the self-reflexive moment. So the detail of what they ever talked about was not recorded.

But he tired of Angie's chattering, of her insistence on participating in every conversation; so that, when she was there, he could not talk about his writing or his rejections or his schemes of underground pornography or underground cinema without her intervention. Which held up discussion and distracted him. So that he resented her. While Graham or Al or Dexter would sit talking late into the night, intruding on his intimacy with Angie, with whom he wanted to be alone and in bed. So that he resented them. And worried at this growing pattern of inflexibility.

Angie and Graham sought further contact. When Joe went out to make coffee, they reached to each other. And this became something of a ritual, every time Joe went out, they would kiss there, hands fondling each others' bodies, the smell of coffee there in the kitchen. Her warmth spread to Graham and fondled him, she talked to him, offered him hoarded fragments from her childhood, so that he pictured her, her long legs running along the beaches, her black hair spreading out on the calm

bays, the happy times of her childhood. There were photographs of her as a child all round the house, in a bathing costume on a beach, catching a ball, legs apart, mouth wide with concentration; her head tilted down with shyness for a photograph in her new school uniform. Images of her vulnerability lightened all the rooms. And Joe, Joe even began to fall asleep in his chair, mouth open, snoring. It was a horrible prevision of a future they never believed would come. She would say things, mention Joe's name or talk about intimacies about herself to see if he was provoked, to see if he really slept. And if he didn't, he gave a fine simulation of sleep. And the provocation sometimes was so hurtful that he would have had to have feigned sleep if he heard. This way she made her bids for independence, asserted the autonomy of her past sexual life, and her commitment to its continuance. Her comments were an aggression at him, that had he not slept, or been feigning sleep, she would not have felt able to direct to him. Nor would she have wanted to, for they were only a partial aspect of their relationship. She felt a closeness to him that his trusting sleep, if it were sleep, expressed on his part so vulnerably. But with him asleep, she could gesture a closeness towards Graham in the slight contacts of their bodies, the revelatory conversations.

At a party one evening she spent a lot of time with Graham. Joe was with Lisa which might have meant Angie demanded compensation. Graham never knew when Angie irradiated him in her warmth whether this was directed at him, or at Joe who would feel a corresponding chill at her warmth's withdrawal. He never felt utterly at ease with her, her physical gestures of contact could all too simply have been part of her war with Joe. Nor was he ever sure with Joe, indeed was becoming less sure. He never knew whether Joe dispensed with his girls by palming them off onto some convenient bystander; or whether he was engaged in a provocation merely masochistic, an encouragement of infidelity that he would have to bear, a martyr to his proclaimed libertarianism, a proof that he could sustain it, and a necessary torment for his psyche. And there was the possibility too, of aggression, that Joe wanted to make his satellites uneasy, lured by his girls, a lure that might, indeed, destroy their own relationships. Or it might all have been accidental and thoughtless, and hurtful for Joe. And everyone else.

Graham would sift through the possibilities, but came to no solutions. He spent the evening with Angie, his finger tips touching her brown arms, their bodies seeking slight contacts. She wore a tight-fitting loose knit top which clutched her breasts as if she were hauled in the net of some distant fisherman.

'The first time we met,' he said, 'you offered me raspberry pie.'

'I know.'

'I didn't expect you to remember.'

'Oh yes, I remember. I offered you all the raspberry pie.'

'All ?'

'My share and Joe's share. He was mad, he got really angry.'

'It was very generous of you.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'I wanted you to like it. I was hurt when you refused.'

'I didn't want to refuse it,' he said, 'but I didn't want to upset Joe.'

'Joe was furious. He thought I was flirting with you.'

'I thought you were flirting with me, too,' he said.

'I was. That's why I offered it you.'

'As a token ?'

'If you like,' she said.

'I accepted it in spirit,' he said. His eyes watched her closely. She had picked up a mockery of tone it was hard to break through. He could not tell whether it was used to express real feeling mockingly, or to conceal it beneath other mockery. He talked to her a long time but knew that Joe would be back to take her home. So he finally left her and started talking to a girl called Jo and they went off to her place.

'Angie has developed a concern about you,' Joe told him down at the pub.

'Yes ?' He waited cautiously.

'She thought you shouldn't have gone off with that girl the other night when Jan was waiting at home.'

'Oh.'

'She said it would only make everyone unhappy.'

'I see.'

'I asked her how she knew what would make people unhappy,' said Joe. 'I said, "If he'd got off with you would that have been better ?" Do you know what her answer was ?'

'You tell me,' said Graham.

'She said "Yes."'

'I see,' said Graham.

'Do you ?' said Joe.

They didn't talk much about art. Not the art of fiction. They talked about getting published. They talked about editors. Magazines. They were writing stories at this time. Graham had his aspirations to the novel, was working on a novel, but Joe vowed allegiance solely to the story. Short and sharp as a sweet folk song.

But what this short and sharp and sweet meant, technically, they didn't discuss. They might talk about models, progenitors, though even here there were

areas of obscurity, ambiguity. The writers they enjoyed reading they might not want to emulate. And the writers they might want to emulate, well, it mightn't come out like that, so they were cautious in admitting models, the discrepancy might be too large, might provoke derision. Graham was torn between Lawrence and Sillitoe and the proletarian tradition, and the conscious artifice of Henry James. Or between the provincial celebrations of George Eliot and the exotic expatriation of Durrell. Joe offered Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald. Graham would offer Isherwood. Joe would suggest Dos Passos. But these were hardly technical discussions. Enthusiasms, memories of reading. But what they were doing now, that was something else again, that was something they did, and both were wary of talking about it, both suspected that a premature revelation of a work in progress could result in a failure to complete it.

Angie phoned Graham one morning. 'I've just left my job,' she said.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'why did you do that, I thought you liked it ?'

'I did,' she said, 'but I had a row. I was bored with it, anyway.'

'So what do you do now ?'

'I'm not doing anything,' she said. 'Unemployed at last.'

'Oh yes.'

'We're both unemployed.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I worked that out.'

'I daren't tell Joe,' she said. 'We don't have any money at all now.'

'Why did you do it then ?'

'I didn't want to work either,' she said.

He looked vaguely at his bookshelves.

She asked, 'Are you still there ?'

'Yes, I was just thinking.'

'Can I come and see you ?'

'Sure, why ? But sure, yes.'

'I daren't face Joe,' she said, 'and I haven't got anything to do now and I'm all on my own, so -'

'I don't know why I did it, I just wanted to do it. Anyway, why are you so concerned about it, why are you making such a fuss ? No one in the pub has a regular job except people like you. It's not so unusual is it to give up a job ? I don't know why you're so concerned. I came to see you so I wouldn't have to explain everything to Joe, I

thought if I could talk to you it would be easier to see Joe afterwards, and say I'd thrown in the job. I mean, we owe so much money, it's going to be terrible trying to tell him. But it's all right for Joe not to work, it's not all right for me. I mean how do you know I wouldn't do some writing if I didn't have to work all the time, I might now, now I don't have to work. But it's all right for Joe to talk about not being trapped by society into working, when he's got me working to bring in some money. He's good at getting women to work for him. But every time I said I wanted to give up working, then he'd just say it was impossible and how were we going to eat ? Well, I don't know how we're going to eat. We'll just have to, I don't know, I mean we're not likely to starve or anything, I mean people just don't starve any more, do they ? Anyway, if we do we'll both starve together. I don't see why I should have to work and Joe just do nothing. At least we're equals this way. Why should I have to do all the worrying ? He'll be mad, of course, when he finds out I've been talking to you, he'll hate it that I told you first. But I just couldn't go home and say, I've thrown in my job. I just had to see someone else. Anyway, I like seeing you. It's all right for Joe, he can see people when he likes; but I couldn't see anybody when I was working, I was at work all the time. Well, now I'm going to spend all my time going round seeing people and making up for lost time. I think that's a beaut idea. He'll probably think I've got off with you or something, I just can't wait to see his face, that sort of surprise and then he begins to look bad-tempered and then he stops himself and looks all long-suffering. It's tremendous, I can't wait. Perhaps it'd be best if we did meet him in the pub, then if I tell him there he can't really blow up with everyone around, and by the time we leave the pub and get home he'll have got used to the idea. At least, I don't think he'll blow up with everyone around. Though he keeps talking about uninhibited self-expression, so I suppose he just might. But that's why I gave up the job anyway, it was a self-expressive gesture to give it up like that and now I've given it up I'll be able to spend all my time in uninhibited self-expression. That'll be great. I feel so marvellously free now, just from throwing in that job, I feel all free and light and released. I never realised before how cramping working is, how it folds in on your personality, how it destroys you as a person, and some people never find out at all.'

Joe was very unhappy at Angie's giving up her job but since she had insisted on Graham's coming back with them after the pub, he could not express his full feelings. But he was very unhappy because they were now going to be poor. Nor was he writing much which would have justified the poverty. He was angry at Angie's facile imitation of his own giving up work; but he knew that any complaint would produce her simple insistence on the comparison of their situations. If you're not working, why

should I ? He sat slumped in his chair and flicked idly through an out of date magazine. Graham wandered round the room and found a copy of *Sire* with his story in it.

'What I don't understand about you and Joe,' said Angie, bringing in glasses from the kitchen, 'is your feeble egomania. I can understand people looking at their name in print; but when it's something in *Sire* it's so pathetic.'

She stood behind him, looking down contemptuously.

'Who're you talking to ?' Joe asked.

'Both of you. But I might as well not be, Graham's just sitting perving over his own name.'

'What do you expect him to do, pull himself off or something ?'

Graham couldn't work out whether the hostility was directed at him, or at Angie, or whether Joe just shot it out generally.

'It might be more entertaining,' she said.

'I can think of more entertaining things,' said Graham.

'You are imaginative,' she said.

He looked up in amazement at the change in her mood, at the spread of antagonism to include him.

'Why do you never bring Jan to the pub ?' she said.

'Because she doesn't especially like coming.'

'Because you're afraid someone will get off with her ?'

'No.'

'Because you're afraid no one will get off with her ?'

'No.'

'Because she'll do something your double standard won't be able to take. ?'

'What's got into you ?' Joe asked.

'I'm just asking questions.'

'You're so hostile.'

'I'm not hostile, am I Graham ?'

'No, not especially,' he said.

Joe groaned.

'Anyway, why're you so keen on protecting Graham ?' she asked him.

'I'm not protecting him.'

'Yes you are, you had to chip in to protect him because I was being hostile.'

'You said you weren't.'

'I wasn't but you thought I was.'

Joe shrugged.

'Just what is it between you and Graham ?'

'What's what ?' said Joe wearily.

'It's just like Helen and Pat said.'

'Oh, don't start that again,' said Joe.

'Start what again ? What is it you can't face, what are you covering up ? What is it between you and Graham ? Or is it you and Helen ?'

'I'm not covering up anything, just relax, stop projecting. All right, so you gave up your job, all right, so no one's complaining, no one's saying anything, so you don't have to get all defensive. So we've both given up our jobs now, great, we'll both starve together. I'm not complaining, you're happy, I'm happy, we're all fine, just stop diverting fire that isn't there in these crazy attacks.'

He went out into the kitchen at that. It wasn't a dramatic exit, he'd not raised his voice, but had kept it on a tired, easy monotone; it was as if he didn't really care, as if he'd now achieved the expected, necessary destruction, as if he'd always known he was going to starve and had no especial emotional involvement about it. Graham drew Angie towards him and began to kiss her, on the brow, on the cheeks, drawing her head upwards for she had hung it disconsolately, drawing it upwards and level again with kisses so he could kiss her on the lips. She gradually responded, moved her face away in a sort of avoidance, which amused her, so that by the time Joe's footsteps could be heard approaching the room again she was laughing happily. Joe slumped sleepily in his chair. There was hardly any conversation for Joe and Angie could not discuss her leaving the job with Graham there and Graham and Joe could not continue their usual conversations because Angie in her boredom kept making derisive interruptions, and Graham and Angie could not continue their afternoon's developing intimacy with Joe there. Though when he went out, to find biscuits and more beer, then they would snatch kisses and contact from each other.

'I'm sure he knows,' she said, 'I'm sure that's why he keeps going out for things, just to torture himself by leaving us alone. Unless he's watching through the keyhole, listening just round the corner. He might be doing that.'

'Why would he do that ?

'Oh, voyeurism or something. Some theory of literary creation. Or maybe he'll come rushing in with an axe and split us apart.'

In the still house, so dimly lit, it suddenly seemed a possibility.

They sat in their silence, which Angie alone would break. She made brief sorties at Graham, sensing round the subject of Jan a vulnerable spot, and she carried one sustained raid against Joe, telling Graham about her adolescence, for previous evenings had exhausted her childhood.

'I met this incredible man on the beach once, I was only sixteen, I think I was sixteen, I might have been less though and told him I was sixteen; he was one of those

smooth, cool men, you know, like bachelors with speedboats in cigarette advertisements. Well, he didn't have a speedboat but he had this tremendous sports car, I can't remember what sort, an Aston-Martin or something. And we had this tremendous torrid affair, it was tremendous, we spent days just living in his flat and drinking and you know it was one of those incredibly hot, humid summers, just wandering around naked all day, and drinking pernod and things on the balcony and sleeping out naked on the balcony at night and just looking across at the sea and the seagulls and ships sailing past a million miles away and our hands would just draw their fingertips across each other as we walked round the flat, with those slow silent movements like being underwater and it was like being underwater, it was so still, that still heavy heat and the air thick with moisture and pernod and just the music of the record player and the seagulls calling and sort of merging into it and just watching the sun move round across the sky, so hot and still and full, like it was going to burst, and I remember one night it set just above this sailing boat with a huge mast and it looked, as it came down through the sky and you know how it moves quickly, you can actually see it moving, just before it sets, well it came down and it looked as if when it touched the top of this sailing ship's mast as if it would be pierced and burst and shower all this rich yellow liquid, like oranges or nectar or gold, all over the sea and it would spread all over us as we sat there, naked, watching it, waiting to be drenched with that rich, red shower from it. And I was so innocent then, I was so young, I was still a virgin, and my breasts were still small and not full, and he used to say how marvellous they were, so firm and young and he'd say how he could see them growing each day, like you could see the movement of the sun setting, and I'd never seen a man naked before, seen one walking around touching me all day and it's so tremendous, to be always walking naked, and his balls hanging loose so that I could hold them, cradle them in my hands, and touch him all over with my lips and I became conscious of my body for the first time ever, aware of it, catching glimpses of it reflected in mirrors and polished furniture and feeling it touched where I'd never felt sensation before, and seeing it in sunlight and in moonlight, in that still flat shadowless light that the moon casts, and it makes your body seem to have that marvellous texture, creamy and flat and still, and lying there in the daytime I'd become browned all over, and at night cooled by the moon, stroked and soothed, a whole marvellous cycle of sensation.'

And it became urgently important for Graham that she should have remained, through that, still a virgin and nothing that she said denied that she had so remained, but nor had she been specific. And it was important that he should know, to resolve the narrative. But he could not ask, he could not inquisition her there with Joe any more than Joe could there with him, neither dared probe the depth of fantasy and the

depth of truth, for fear of the answers. And they listened to her in silence, their own sex excited at her narration, their throats thickened with the mucus of saliva, their stomachs tensed with adrenalin from the fear of her truth. While her eyes shone with happiness, the glow of her warm skin and the liveliness of her gestures untouched by their dumb chill.

When she had stopped talking, they noticed that a mouse had crept round the skirting board into the room and was crouched there, its nostrils twitching. Joe threw the beer bottle top he had been fidgeting with. He missed and the mouse scuttled out of sight. But not far, for soon it was back again, waiting at the corner, then running in rapid bursts, twitching its nose at the end of each stage, a frail, tense, poised creature, unaware of them, or trusting them, or disregarding them. And each time it stopped, Joe would throw a beer bottle top at it, and it would scuttle back out of sight. And impatient, Joe began to throw the tops at it as soon as it first emerged from round the corner. Graham, who opened windows to let flies escape rather than crush them, became edgy. And the fact that the mouse always dodged away before being struck in no way lessened his edginess. Yet he could say nothing. The constraints of its being their house in which he was only, tonight he suspected, a marginally welcome guest, the constraints of not wanting to appear sensitive before Joe's aggression, the constraints of his protested tolerance preventing him from interfering in other people's behaviour, all these paralysed his objections. But he grew tense as they sat there, waiting for the mouse to appear, to edge slowly round the skirting board and scuttle by, waiting for Joe to aim. His stomach contracted. Finally Angie said, 'Can't you leave it alone ?'

'Hemingway once said the greatest practice in concentration a writer could have was big game hunting,' Joe said, aiming again. 'This is my practice.'

Angie phoned him one morning and said Joe had told her to ring and see if he would take her and all their belonging down the coast. They were moving. He wondered what Joe intended; but if they were really going down the coast, then that would halt the possible development of hostility from Joe and attraction towards Angie. Yet provoking his being alone for a day with Angie might be seen as deliberately destructive. He wondered if Joe was setting up the situation to provoke disaster; or if it were a genuine, simple appeal of friendship to get them out of the city and disaster before it was too late. They did not want to separate, Angie and Joe, but if they stayed in the city they inevitably would.

And they needed help, they were so poor. Since both refused to work they had no income now and could pay no rent. Except the smallest sum they could rent the

shack for. They would go down there and withdraw from the expenses of urban living and Joe would write again, untrammelled by the ties of society, the obligations inevitably contracted.

Joe had already gone. When Graham arrived, Angie was in the house on her own, looking her most helplessly young and warm and smiling and helpless. He kissed her for those qualities. While she made coffee he wandered around amongst the half-filled boxes of books and clothes and torn magazines. He looked in the cupboards for something to eat but they were cleared; not emptied and cleaned, but cleared to that indecisive stage, when detritus still remained that might be packed, or might be junked, or might be just abandoned. There was an almost finished jar of peanut butter and a torn, near-emptied cellophane packet of brown rice: relics of Joe's health food attempts.

'They didn't do him any good,' she said.

'Except for something to write about,' Graham offered.

Walking round the small kitchen as she messed at the coffee made each of them conscious of the other, each avoiding physical contact, each skirting round the obvious. Till he put his hands round her, resting them on her thighs, and then she turned round to him and they kissed.

'If we keep playing this game we'll ruin the coffee..'

'How erotic,' she said.

He sat on the couch. She brought the coffee in and sat on a chair, but he asked her to join him.

'We're supposed to be packing.'

'But I never get a chance to be with you properly,' he said.

Her fingers played through his hair. 'It doesn't seem right,' she said, 'without Joe pretending to be asleep in one of the chairs.'

'Did he only pretend ?'

'About what ?' she said. 'I don't know. He never said anything. But he's terribly uneasy about you. He'd be terribly hurt if I got off with you. He talked about it. He said he'd have to accept it, but he'd hate it. He must have had the idea even to be able to talk about it because it's not the sort of thing he talks about, I mean, there's this commitment to seeming unconcerned, isn't there ? But he brought it up, anyway. He said he'd prefer it if I got off with anyone but you.'

'And will you ?'

'What ?'

'Get off with anyone but me ?'

She kissed him. She said, 'I don't see why it has to be one or the other.'

He wondered if it was because it would hurt Joe so much that she was toying with the idea. But mightn't that be, after all, part of the attraction of the idea for him too ? He hoped it wasn't. He didn't want to alienate Joe, had no wish to hurt him. And yet the possibility played around him. He wondered why Joe had asked her to phone him up. Had Joe predicted this situation, was he trying to provoke what he claimed so to dread ? From a self-destructive masochism ? From displaced homosexuality ? As a convenient way to break with Angie ?

He began to walk round the house again, the situation becoming wryly familiar. Angie pushed things into boxes in a disorganised way. They would make glancing contact occasionally.

'It would be marvellous,' he said. And it wasn't so much the vocabulary of insincerity that troubled him, which could be used, after all, for sincere emotions, but the echoing familiarity of his phrase.

And Joe there on the beach prefiguring it and reliving it as it happened, perhaps already writing it.

So instead of making love they went out to eat, for they were both hungry, which would give them time to consider. And oh why, oh why, did he always have to go through these rigmaroles. He was still denied spontaneity. He still had to play through his delaying, deferring compulsions. But Angie was delighted, who had not eaten a full cooked meal for two weeks, they had been so poor, both unemployed, she said.

It was odd that Joe had been so explicit to Angie, that he was so vulnerable to her sleeping with Graham. Yet it need not have meant other than it expressed. It need not have implied his having tried to sow the seed of betrayal into her, but rather his open dependence on her and his honest appeal to her faithfulness, his admission to her of a truth, for on truth he had tried to base their relationship, she said. But the other possibilities still floated. Graham rejected them, finally. He took the statement at its surface expressiveness; after which, to get off with Angie would be a cruel betrayal of Joe, which he did not want. And he later recognised that he had not been motivated by any consideration of not betraying Jan, which indicated strange things about his prior fidelity to Joe or his growing distance from her. He wished he did not have these roaming thoughts, that he could not answer.

So they drove down the coast in the early afternoon and she chattered to him happily while the sun played gently on the dusty bush. And occasionally ruffled her fingers through his hair, or stroked her hand along his thigh. They agreed they had to make love some time, yet were not even capable of having five minutes of simple embrace, though he had intended to stop but had reached the cluster of houses and

two or three shops where Joe rented the shack, without realising they had got so close. And they could scarcely back out of the place unnoticed.

So she was delivered to the shack unscathed, which must have been a relief to Joe that night when he asked her, surely. Unless she lied to him to upset him, which was wholly possible. But that was not Graham's responsibility. They sat in the evening warmth, drinking wine from a flagon and eating cheese and biscuits, which was all they had. When Graham turned to wave at them as he got into his car they looked for all the world like a couple of pioneers, Joe in his khaki bush shirt and faded denims, Angie with her arm around him, both of them holding up their hands to shield their eyes from the setting sun. Graham drove off alone through the bush like a supply-ship returning to the metropolis from some outpost; or like the serpent leaving the garden, sad at leaving them, but knowing they would soon be following, and would all meet up back in the city. Hell will unfold to you her widest gates. The night was still and clear. White owls crossed over him and rabbits watched from the edges of the road. With the windows down he could hear the noise of the cicadas above the motor. And since they were living so far down the coast, Graham saw nothing more of them. He could never find time off from the succession of urban occupations he created for himself, so that he was not there as the relationship gradually disintegrated and indeed only heard at third hand that it was disintegrating, and when she finally moved out it was someone else who drove down to bring her and her things back to town.

3: LIFE IN REVIEW

'I'd like to do some book reviewing,' Graham said.

'You should ask Ralph,' they said. 'He knows all about that.' Ralph who had played in a Dublin jazz band with the Ginger Man. Ralph whose home phone number was a secret from his wife and the department.

'You plan to scale the literary heights by reviewing ?' Ralph said. 'You've read the standard biographies and found everyone has to review. Or do you just want to earn a few extra bob ?'

'A bit of both, I suppose,' Graham said.

'Mulgrave's your man,' said Ralph. 'Without a doubt. Or hardly. I'd just pop in and see him.'

'Is that all right ?'

'Is what all right ?' Ralph looked at his sandwich doubtfully.

'Just popping in and seeing him.'

'Seize the bull by the horns. The first lesson of the literary life. You've read your Hemingway.'

What he'd hoped was that Ralph would offer to have a word to Mulgrave. But Ralph didn't.

He went into the *Bulletin* office one morning. In its great days it had been down near the Quay. Now it was part of an empire, sharing a building with the *Daily Telegraph* and *Women's Weekly* in the centre of town. He got in to see Mulgrave with no difficulty.

'Reviewing,' said Mulgrave. 'Reviewing. Well, we're not exactly short of reviewers but we could always use somebody who's good.. Would you be good ?'

'I think so. I hope so.'

'Ah, if all our hopes were realized, who would need to review anyway ?'

He looked across his desk at Graham. His office was a glass-partitioned cubicle, and the noise of typing and phone conversations and people walking along the corridor filled up any silence.

'Have you reviewed before ?'

Graham said he had.

'Student papers, I suppose.'

'Mainly.'

All but one review of a book of English regional literary associations, county by county, for the local paper. He didn't specify it. It legitimized his 'mainly,' gave him the confidence to make the dubious exception.'

'Ralph Ireland suggested I should see you.'

'Ah, Ralph, how is he ?'

'He's pretty good.'

'He used to be very good. He hasn't done anything for us for a long time.'

'He's been on leave.'

'That could explain it, I suppose,' Mulgrave said. 'How do you get along with him ?'

'Well, I hardly know him. He was on leave when I arrived and I've only recently met him.'

'But he gave you good advice.'

He stopped himself saying, I hope so. And to say I think so might have seemed too confident. He tried a friendly smile and silence.

'How about lunch ?' said Mulgrave.

They walked amongst the shoppers and office workers off to lunch, the spring sun gentle and warming and hopeful, the city chugging along in an optimistic tranquillity.

'Can you imagine doing this in London ?' Mulgrave asked.

'What's that ?'

'You'd have pleurisy and double pneumonia by the time you'd walked half a block. Then you'd probably have to queue. For dumplings. Or steak and kidney pie. It took all the literary genius of the nation of Shakespeare and Iris Murdoch to call it steak. Whatever you might think about Australia, it does know the meaning of steak.'

Great plates of meat, curling and sizzling in the Antipodean sun.

'It's enough to turn you into a vegetarian.'

'Which is ?'

'I'd have thought both,' said Mulgrave. 'The absence and the ersatz no less than the fly-blown surfeit. People who've grown up in England have a very ambivalent attitude towards flesh, I find, don't you ?'

'Do I have one or do I find that ?'

'Well, you tell me,' said Mulgrave.

'I think one probably ends up with ambivalent attitudes to most things, one way or another,' Graham said.

Mulgrave chuckled. He directed them into a doorway.

'Have you ever been here ? It's a Scandinavian smorgasbord. You pay by the plate. You can have as much as you can heap on your plate.'

They began heaping. Mulgrave was better at it.

'How well do you know Ralph ?' he asked.

'Not very well. I was talking to him about reviewing and he suggested I should see you.'

He wondered if it was bad form to bring up reviewing again. Should he have waited all through lunch until it spontaneously arose ? But it did spontaneously arise through the mention of Ralph. Wasn't that the opportunity to take, to return to business ? Or was it for Mulgrave to return to business ?

'He's a very strange man, Ralph. Have you ever gone walking with him ?'

'No, I can't say I have.'

'Just through the streets,' said Mulgrave. 'I didn't imagine you bushwalking.'

'No.'

'He has a compulsion. He picks up things all the time. Off the footpath. Not just coins. But everything. Coins alone one might understand. But bent nails, washers, hair-pins. By the time you've walked a block his hands are stuffed full of scrap metal. It's a very strange habit.'

He chuckled and wiped his lips with his napkin.

A couple of novels arrived through the mail for Graham to try out on.

'What a nerve,' said Ralph.

'Well, I guess he's got no way of knowing whether I can do what he wants.'

'I've found with Mulgrave,' said Ralph, 'it is very hard to have any idea of what he might want. He's a very odd fish. He's quite compulsive, you know. If you ever walk through the streets with him you realize it. He picks up anything he sees. Old pens, nails, screws, any old scrap iron. By the time you've gone a block his hands are stuffed full of all manner of junk. A strange character, our Mulgrave.'

Then the books started coming in earnest, with a scribbled note on copy paper, 750 words by October 11th, 800 words by Nov 1st. The trial review was never printed. The books were six months old, but he'd hoped Mulgrave would run it anyway. He didn't. It remained a test, part of that world of the arbitrary, of the grids and hurdles that had to be worked amongst. It nagged at Graham, that piece written but unused and unusable in any other context. Something completed yet unfulfilled. He filed it away in case he could ever use it or needed to retrieve it.

Going to post the review to meet the peremptory deadlines became a ritual. Not so much reading the books; he did that at various times, but typing the review was usually an evening task; it was additional, not central. Reviewing could only be part of a literary life. Somewhere along the way literature itself had to be written. The reviews were an evening bonus, overtime. And then he and Jan would go up to the Cross from the house they were sharing in Paddington and post it to catch the late collection, and maybe get a coffee at the Piccolo, or maybe just walk around, a feeling of something achieved, of participation in a world of letters, of having a toe-hold. He took out a subscription to the magazine for his parents. His father wrote back, 'I'm sorry about all the muck you have to read.'

It was a telephone relationship. Mulgrave would phone and offer a new book, could he get it done in a couple of weeks, and then the book would arrive by post, the slip of paper with the deadline, sometimes corresponding to the date given on the phone, sometimes not. It was hard to see that the dates had any significance. Sometimes Mulgrave would have two or three reviews in hand, unpublished, and the order they appeared in had no obvious relationship to the deadlines Graham had been given. But he tried to keep to the dates. It created the illusion of necessity, of someone depending on his work, of the reviews having a defined place in a complex reality. It wasn't the urgency of the foreign correspondent, cabling despatches from remote bars. But it had its own urgency. It was important to be able to keep on doing it, week after week, to respond to the summons. To prove he could do it. Important to Graham, anyway. On average there was a review a fortnight, though sometimes they would be clustered together, week after week; and sometimes there would be a gap, nothing arriving in the mail, nothing appearing in print. he would wonder what he'd done wrong, whether he'd delivered the unacceptable assessment, broken some unspelled out taboo. And then there would be a call and he would be offered Mailer, Updike, Le Carré, Drabble.

'I asked one of those Melbourne Catholic poets if he would review,' Mulgrave said, 'and he wrote back and said he only reviewed for the quarterlies now.'

There was a silence.

'Can you believe it ?'

Graham stalled. Yes, he could believe it. What he couldn't be sure of was whether this was a mark of judgement and success or of delusional grandeur and hubris.

'I had a visit from one of your professors up there,' Mulgrave said. 'The mad one. Or isn't that specific enough? You must know him.'

'How was he ?'

'Rather offensive, I felt,' Mulgrave said. 'He threatened to punch my nose and throw me out of the window if I cut his wife's reviews or failed to run them again. I said "No time like the present" but he just huffed and puffed. Are they all like that up there?'

'No, he's quite exceptional.'

'Really ? I thought he was rather ordinary. But I can see that he thinks of himself as exceptional. And his wife. I wish she would review only for the quarterlies. Maybe you could pass the idea along.' He chuckled. 'Take care not to stand beside high windows if you do.'

It was the illusion of community, membership of the literary, the world-wide web of reading and writing and reviewing. An immaterial world of imaginings, of voices, of signs. He rarely met Mulgrave. Just the telephone conversations and the books with their little slips of copy paper and the scrawled deadline and word length. For years after these slips would flutter down to the floor as he opened one of those review books, the scribbled message bringing a brief flash of those times.

Mulgrave would phone and talk of some visiting figure he was interviewing, or a poem he'd placed in this little magazine, or a piece on film he had had accepted in *Sight and Sound.*

'And how are you doing ?' he would suddenly ask.

'Oh, I'm getting a few things written.'

'And published ?'

'Still trying,' he would say. 'I've sent out a batch of stories.'

'Not here,' said Mulgrave. 'You haven't submitted them here, I hope. You'd just be wasting your time. You should try England and America. No one reads literary magazines here. No one even sees them. They just moulder in dank cellars in university libraries. Like most of their contributors. You need to make a name. You'll never do it in those things.'

Graham assumed Mulgrave had had some rejection from one of the quarterlies. He had seen poems of his in past issues, stray copies on bookshelves, forgotten back numbers in beach houses, dusty in the eucalypt filtered light. It was all part of the world he was trying to connect with, the magic circle of publication, of acceptance, of recognition, of acclaim. This was the apprenticeship, the learning time, working on the scraps and margins, picking up skills, picking up the confidence of familiarity, continuing that confidence of the weekly essay, the rapid concentration, the focus, the sleight of hand, the fatal facility that Francis Adams had detected in

Marcus Clarke. But Marcus Clarke had died bankrupt at thirty five in 1881. And Francis Adams had spent his time in Australia and shot himself in a hotel in Southampton in 1893. These weren't stories Graham knew at the time. This was the literary history he was to discover. As he grew into the literary present, he became conscious of the literary past. The flat, dusty walls of the brick city in the dusty sun filled out, developed the depth of a past, emanated the resonances of former hopes, lost futures, offered sites for all those imaginary possibilities, backdrops of desire, settings for anecdotes in its eating houses, pubs, streets.

'Of course the days of print are numbered,' Mulgrave said, more than once. 'I'm surprised that someone of your generation would still persist in it. The forms are all exhausted. You can see that. The future is back to the visual. Print was only a minor hiccup in evolution. Reading will become a specialized hobby. Like royal tennis. There will probably be reading clubs with ceremonial dinners. I don't see that it's really your world at all.'

'I suppose so,' said Graham, 'in the long term I suppose so.'

'In the long term we're all dead.'

'It's a bit late to retrain.'

'It will get even later,' Mulgrave warned. 'Movies are the thing. And even more than movies, television. That's where the action is.'

'I don't know that world.'

'You just go to any cinema.'

'I mean I don't know anybody working in it.'

'Oh, working in it. There's no point in trying to work in it. It's in such a rudimentary stage of development. Working in it would probably be a frightful bore. You can imagine the kind of people it attracts. But people want to know about it. It's a subject. It's like the gold rush. The people who made the money were the suppliers and the store-keepers, not the diggers. Service industries. The appetite for books about movies is enormous. It's insatiable. Forget literature, brother. This is where the growth is.'

'Can you do it from here ?'

'Of course,' he said, his surprise at the question resonating with shock along the phone system. 'This is the best place in the world. Because of the notorious meanness of the television station moguls we have an absolutely unique diet of old movies. Black and white classics they won't run in America because they're not in colour. And they won't run them in Britain because they're American or because they're movies or because they're fun. Where else would you see them ? It's an

extraordinary opportunity. And there are people with their own collections here, of course. Private projecting rooms. You'd be surprised at what goes on in this town.'

Life was too full for television. Graham was of the last print generation, had still not succumbed to the electronic media. The evenings were spent in reading, writing, going to the pub, going to parties, going to the movies. He went to a lot of movies, devouring the canon of accepted classics that were run and re-run at the W.E.A. film study group and the university film society, with forays to the new releases in town or to the Soviet Friendship Society with its Eisenstein festival. Narrow staircases in old city blocks opening into old assembly rooms, ranked chairs, blinds down. But writing about film: he wondered enough about writing about writing. Criticism and commentary were part of the job, but he always feared that it wasn't the real thing, that it was a diversion from the real writing, the primary writing, that it was a parasitic activity that had to be cut back regularly so that it would not take over like some strangler vine. Writing about movies would be more of the same. Writing for movies, that would be different. But the only way he could see to do that was to write fiction that could become movies. And writing about writing, writing reviews, writing lectures, all that was always ready to intervene, the fiction dreamed, delayed.

He'd been reviewing for a year before he was given the lead review. There were usually half a dozen reviews an issue, around seven hundred words each. But the lead review was given a display heading across the page and a thousand or twelve hundred words. And now he'd made it. The ladder of ascent to the lead review. It was a further lure, a privileging hard to resist. Now he was conscious of holding the place, the fear of relegation to the regular reviews hanging there as a perpetual threat. The lead review carried the reviewer's by line at the head of the piece, instead of tacked onto the end like the others. Of such detail were distinctions maintained.

'Every few months the proprietor goes through an issue with a pen and marks the by-lines that have crept up into too large a type. He bounces them all back down to eight point. Then after a few weeks they start creeping up again, ten point, twelve, fourteen. That's when they overreach themselves and the proprietor cuts as all down to size again.'

It was a paper full of atrocity stories about the proprietor, repeated with relish from one generation to another.

'You must know the story of the office boy he sacked in the lift. For not wearing his tie straight or not tipping his hat or something. Some heinous breach of company rules.'

'No,' said Graham.

'He asked the boy what he earned a week, wrote a chit for him to collect it from the pay office and told him he was sacked. The boy was delighted. He worked for the post office.'

'You should come in and meet the editor,' Mulgrave said.

One afternoon he did.

'What about features ?' the editor asked. 'Do you have any ideas for features ?'

He'd gone in woefully unprepared. He had no real interest in writing features. Reviewing was enough, it had a connection with the world of literature. But features would take him into the world of journalism, and he had decided against that. The idea was to write novels, and the university seemed a better base for that than journalism. He didn't want to spend his time developing a second base, the fiction eternally deferred. But instead of just saying that, instead of saying what he preferred and being straightforward, neither of which responses he was ever convinced worked, he suggested maybe an article on the Congress for Cultural Freedom, where it got its funds from. He'd no idea of how you'd go about it, it was just something he knew of as a mystery.

'There's nothing strange about Cultural Freedom,' the editor said.

'Well, there have been rumours,' Graham suggested. At Oxford Pete had said it was U.S. State Department money. And he'd heard the speculations again in Sydney, at a party for an ailing radical quarterly.

'There's no mystery,' the editor said. He was terse about it. As well he might have been. When he was replaced, as the editors were regularly replaced, he resurfaced as editor of the Cultural Freedom journal. It was another two years before the C.I.A. was revealed as the body behind Cultural Freedom. He could have been in the forefront of investigative journalism. Or there again, he could have been dead.

There was an arts festival and Graham was one of a panel of speakers. Ziggie, an enfant terrible of student journalism who had been jailed for publishing obscenity was on the panel with him. And Joe, an intermittent story teller. And a poet, an inevitable poet. Ziggie asked had anyone noticed that the topic New Directions in Writing sounded like Nude Erections in Writing. Some of his best ideas came to him sitting on the toilet, he said. it was an audience of moneyed pensioners, come for the shock of the new.

Graham was introduced to a publisher, a living myth. He had left Europe in the 1930s for New Zealand, the ship had stopped in Melbourne, he had gone ashore, discovered a good bookshop, got himself a job in it, and cashed in the rest of his ticket. He had built up the shop, begun publishing, established a respected list with a sound economic base in the educational market.

'You must do us a book,' he said. 'Really. I am always on the look out for young men of talent. Why don't you think of a book for us, write me a proposal ? Not fiction. Something serious. Something that will make money. Then we can afford fiction.'

'Well,' said Graham, 'Gavin Mulgrave had been talking about our doing a book together.'

'Ah, Mulgrave. He did a very successful book for us. That made a lot of money. Well, not a fortune of course. But good. Now, if you could do that again.'

'I think he'd be interested. We've talked about some ideas.'

'Together. The two of you together. A marvellous idea.'

He crossed his legs and leaned across. Graham was caught in the tangle of chair legs and human legs.'

'I think you will come up with something good,' the publisher said, leaning across to hear and be heard in the hubbub.

Mulgrave took his annual leave and went to Hollywood.

'You sound surprised.'

'No,' said Graham.

'You've never heard of taking a holiday in Hollywood. Greece, Florence, Brighton. But not Hollywood.'

'Well - .'

'I just have to go there. I'll suffocate if I stay in this office another day.'

When Mulgrave got back, he'd lost the books pages. The arts editor who had handled them while he was away held onto them. Mulgrave continued his interviews with movie stars, directors, writers, but he had lost his empire. The arts editor had his own team. Graham was dropped.

He missed the reviewing. He had liked the sense of writing in some role, for some function. Though it was not clear what the function was if he thought about it. Now it had finished he could afford to think more deeply. Now his guilts were assuagable. Writing for a right-wing paper was something he felt there was every

reason to feel guilt about. He hadn't felt any. Not consciously. No doubt somewhere there must have been some repressed feelings. He could afford to acknowledge them now. And now he had got some reviewing for the quarterlies. Though he had his doubts about that, too. Their circulations were small, their readership smaller. At least reviewing for a paper with a circulation of 40,000 had made the activity seem real. And what alternative was there ? The newspapers were equally right wing. The token left wing journal limped along with a claimed 10,000 circulation. He went to a party for it. The picture window looked out on a gully of gum trees. The editor's wife said 10,000 wasn't enough, they needed more readers to make it viable. 'Sometimes one wonders if there are even ten thousand intelligent people in Australia, let alone more,' she said. Graham recoiled. He could see no happier a future here, and they didn't even pay contributors. Nor were they that left wing when you got down to reading what they wrote. Vanity of vanities. He had enjoyed crossing out the line on the *Bulletin* cheques that signed away all copyright when you endorsed the cheque to cash it. At first he had been filled with outrage, at the effrontery and intransigence of it. 'Just cross it out,' the accountant said at the bank. 'Nothing to do with us.' Doing battle with the right for his rights had given its own satisfactions too.

And now the meetings were actualized. Instead of the peremptory phone calls and the evening trip to the late collection post box, now there were weekends in the library to work on the book. Sometimes Gavin would have been in the office on a Saturday morning and they would meet in the afternoon. Other times they would go in on a Sunday. It filled the flat times, the weekends that had dragged so as a teenager and ever after seemed imprinted with that tedium. You could go out in the country. Or spend Saturday afternoon at the pub. But if you drank too much in the afternoon you lost the evening in the pub and the party afterwards. So it occupied time. And profitably. That was the romance of libraries. The sandstone portals, the tiled entrance hall, the old dark polished timbers of the doors and desks and shelves. The gloom was dispelled by the sense of profitability. The sealed-off rooms, remote from traffic and sunlight, rain and fumes, were a breeding ground for ideas. The humidifiers of petrified thought. Just the quiet rustle of turning pages, hands moving across paper as notes were jotted down, whispered conversations at the desk where orders were taken and books collected, brought up from the hidden mines of knowledge, accessible only by transcribing the call number from the ranks of index cards in the catalogue drawers. They began reading their way through their chosen materials. Sitting at the old timber desks, the tapping heels of passing librarians offering a sad erotic frisson through the afternoon drowsiness, the unopened books, the doorway to romance, the

uncut pages, the hair to be let loose, the ecstatic release from the tedium eternally promised, infinitely delayed.

Mulgrave could be quite peremptory, dismissing with a curt 'no' some piece Graham had discovered with cautious enthusiasm. But he seemed quite flexible about his own choices. When Graham expressed doubt about one of Gavin's suggestions, Gavin re-read it with distaste. 'Can't think why you even considered it,' he said, passing it back.

His way of working was an insight to Graham. Sailing in with confidence, working rapidly, decisively even if arbitrarily. Be just young man and if you can't be just, be arbitrary. Graham found a paperback anthology of Gothic horror Gavin had edited. 'Where on earth did you find something like that ?' was all he would say. He wouldn't talk about it. It was another area he'd sailed into and out of again. Nothing paid well enough to work in any other way. His interviews were brilliant, nonetheless. He had evolved a flat, laconic style, a deadpan setting for the banalities his celebrities uttered. He kept his material at a distance, handling it as if with long pincers. Not for him the sleeves rolled up and immersion in the entrails of the subject.

Editing an anthology for the educational market was not something Graham had had in mind. It was not the debut into the world of books he had dreamed. He wasn't sure even now as he sat in the quiet, polished gloom of the Mitchell library that he wanted to do it. But he doubted that it was ever what Mulgrave had yearned after either. It was part of the undergrowth of literary production. Like reviewing. To stay pure and clear of it and write only the pure and clear novels, that would somehow be to miss the point of it all. The fun. Was rifling through old books in a library on a Saturday afternoon fun ? One day it might seem to have been. One day it might seem to have been an idyllic moment of innocence and hope and simplicity. But at the time, wasn't it tedious and wasn't it somehow unserious, peripheral ? It passed the hours, though. Hours that would have been frittered away in emotions or alcohol, drinking, making love, quarrelling, reconciling, drives to the country, walks along the beach. But all that continued anyway. The anthology was additional, generating a book out of the peripheral hours. And spreading beyond the periphery, eroding other time, Graham borrowing books from the university library to sift through in the evenings, supplementing the weekend sessions.

'We can't possibly write the introduction,' Gavin said. 'We'd just make fools of ourselves. No need to expose our ignorance.'

'I suppose not,' said Graham.

'Can't you get some professor or other ? That's what we need. The dead hand.'

Mulgrave didn't share that anti-university bias of a lot of the journalists. He could perceive a value in the academy, a seal of approval which in itself had a market value. It was all part of a world of signs and illusions, status and power, the academy, the media, Hollywood. There was nothing disillusioned about Mulgrave. He never gave any indication that he had ever had illusions. He saw the world with a cold fishy eye and a chuckle of dissociation and distaste. Those were the conditions in which you operated. And at the difficult or contentious or idealistic or naive, his attention would simply dissolve. He gave them no acknowledgment. It was a disdain that for all its energy-saving effectiveness revealed too clearly its disdain. It didn't make him friends in journalism. But nor did journalism offer him the sort of friends he would have cared to have had.

'Perhaps you could draft out some introductory notes on each author,' Mulgrave suggested. 'You've got access to all that sort of thing at university. Dates. It only needs a few lines. Then you can pass them across to me. You know the sort of thing that's required. Better than I do, I'm sure.'

I probably do, thought Graham. He wanted to be sure they didn't make some hideous error. He could have seen it as an exploitation, but he preferred it this way. The hands-on approach. At least you got to know what was involved. He'd talked to research assistants who had habitually faked data in psychology experiments. They knew what the experimenter wanted to prove and they provided the results and went to the pub. That had shocked him: not only at the level of the evasion of honest work, but at the implications for society's entire scientific base. Was it all like that, faked, ramshackle ? He rather felt it was.

'I don't think there's any need to add anything,' Mulgrave said. 'These seem perfectly adequate.'

Biographical notes and select bibliographical information were hardly something you could wax lyrical over. Perfectly adequate was no doubt a perfectly adequate response.

The book was still to come out when Graham went back to England.

'What on earth are you doing that for ?' Mulgrave said.

'Well, I have my fare paid back. It's part of the contract.'

'You don't have to use it just because the ticket's paid for. I really can't imagine. England. All that cold, and the food, and the people.'

The whole telephone shuddered along with him.

'I thought you were happy here.'

'Well, I am, but -'

'I find it most strange,' he said.

Graham sat silent. It was strange, he agreed. But everything was strange. How could he prefer living here if he'd not tried living there ? And mightn't he want to go on to somewhere else ? There was a whole world of possibility, wasn't there ?

'I won't be able to use that story,' Mulgrave said.

It wrenched Graham's stomach. One moment in this anthology, international series, Mulgrave editing the Australian volume; and the next out of it, still no international exposure, still tapping the doors unregarded.

'You must let me know how you get along,' Mulgrave said, unconvincingly.

'I will,' said Graham. The terror of the abyss opening before him.

It was some six years later. Graham and Joe were doing the rounds of the Sydney bookshops with their new magazine, their short story magazine. Marcel dropped out.

'I really don't feel well,' she said. 'I don't think I can do it. I'll just have to go home. Don't worry, I'll get a bus.'

And she was gone.

'She did what we all would like to do,' said Joe. 'She's amazing. She just walked away.'

They stood in George Street wondering could they just walk away too ? But they had the magazine. They had to get it into the shops, they had to charm or cajole, beg, expose themselves to the booksellers' acid assessments, appeal to the lost categories of art and innovation, literature.

'Let's get it over with,' said Graham.

'The puritan way of life,' said Joe. 'Suffer, endure, delay fulfilment.'

'We can have a drink as soon as we're finished.'

'And the sooner the better in your view ?'

'Don't you think so ?'

'I'm still stunned at Marcel. At the simplicity of her refusal. She just said no. Where does she get the strength ?'

'You knew Gavin Mulgrave, didn't you ?' said the lady in one of the bookshops.

Graham said yes.

'Were you close to him ?'

Joe stood there, humming inwardly, silently, loudly.

'Well, we did a book together.'

'Do you ever hear from him ?'

'No,' said Graham.

'Do you know his address ? Do you know where he is ?'

'Well, he's in America,' said Graham.

'I need to get in touch with him. I need him to sign the papers so we can get divorced.'

'I don't know how you'd get in touch with him,' said Graham.

'People just come up to you and give you stories,' Joe said. 'You just stand there and they offer them to you.'

'He never mentioned he'd been married in the whole time I knew him,' said Graham.

'Were you close to him ?' said Joe.

And later again, Graham was in Los Angeles with Bobbie when they were planning their publishing partnership, the next assault on Parnassus, and he tracked Gavin down through his American publisher.

'How amazing. How extraordinary,' Gavin said. 'So much has happened. I hardly know where to begin.'

He drove now, and now it was Graham who flinched and braced his feet on the floor and held on to the grab handle.

'It all worked out better than anyone could have planned. My book came out here and they gave it an absolute hammering in New York. All the stops out. So I wrote back a reply. And they published it in place of their old snaggle-toothed columnist's column. And gave me his job. I've never looked back. It's marvellous here. The climate. The wealth. And the people. You meet the most amazing people. The town is literally brimming over with the widows of the great directors. You can imagine, for every director there are three or four widows. And they all have fantastic stories to tell. It's a veritable goldmine. They give these marvellous parties. I've never regretted it for a moment. I should have come here years ago. Of course there's the smog. Children collapsing in school playgrounds from lack of oxygen. But that's the price you have to pay. It's either that or walk, brother. I'm surprised you've never moved here.'

Sometimes people would tell Graham stray anecdotes about Mulgrave, how he left nothing behind in the *Bulletin* office but two left-footed shoes. He must have taken all his papers with him for deposit in the archive that was to bear his name, his own library amidst the freeways.

4. MATESHIP

So he had come from England a second time. And it was bohemia that lured. The sun. The sensuality. If not Byzantium, then maybe Outremer. Certainly all exotic. Just the body was exotic after England. Here there was a perpetual golden tawniness. So that was it. He had to admit, that was what it was. The sirens' song. And here it all was. The pub. That exchange of ideas and touch. That transit lounge for sexual travellers. Critical drinking. The theories of anarchism were still subscribed to. Yet he never got involved in them to the extent of doing his own private reading in the anarchist classics. That was hardly necessary, hardly encouraged. The anarchism was the élite notation of, in the end, acceptability. Like bohemia's tenuous hold on the world of literary production this libertarian link was a mark, a notation. It attracted the middle class. Philosophically respectable. End of ideology ideology. Certainly anti-communist. Anti-authoritarian, and communism was presented as a type of authoritarian repression. But it was the practice of libertarianism that was the lure. Here people didn't just debate freedom and morality, they fucked. Well, people no doubt fucked in England; but never, it seemed to Graham, with the same gusto, the same ease and readiness. Here the sun and the distance away from the old world had bleached away sexual inhibitions. Here people drank and made love and felt the sun on their pores with a freedom that he could never imagine could ever be attempted in England. And the literary milieu, that made it pleasant. Art always has this erotic connexion. From the time of going to the public library after school to meet girls. Eyes peering through the steel shelving. The bookish type who is just waiting to be unleashed into amazing sexual efflorescence. Him ? Her ? His projection ? Her telepathic message ?

There was a record. A single maybe. Graham only remembered the one track. Hey Mr Tambourine man. They played it every morning. Maybe it was the only record. While they shaved or had breakfast. He didn't remember eating much. Maybe Joe fried sausages and bacon. That was possible. While Graham looked out of the tiny windows of the wooden shack at the voluptuous greenery of the trees and bushes. And listened to Dylan. The blind leading the blind. A children's crusade.

Then the bright morning and a short walk to the bus stop, past the shipwrights' yard with its heavy iron pipes and hydrants and couplings, rusting softly amidst the yellowed, seeding grasses. The mouth organ in his head. And he'd be forming phrases, trying to use every minute of time, listening to dialogue for a novel he was

writing, until the mantric repetitions released him into a sun-drenched reverie of fame and acclaim, not especially defined, not concretely realised or minutely observed, but nonetheless erogenously felt as this warm well-being, this confident hope like the sun flashing on the water in the concrete bay where the soap factory ran down to the harbour.

Graham remembered these as orange juice mornings. Did Joe cut up and squeeze fresh oranges ? This was the land of the fresh orange. One of the lands. Ripe to be cut up and squeezed. Or was it a can of orange concentrate ? Were these the orange mornings of the exquisite sharp yet not sour, sweet yet not cloying, perfect juice ? Or the wrench in the stomach, the bitterness in the gills, as the sulphurous brew ran its yodelling, curdling course through the unready system ? Maybe sometimes it was one, sometimes the other, and even on the mornings when there was no juice of any sort there was still that early morning yellow freshness, that acid tang. And the salt air of this harbourside dockside street, sharp yellow mornings, promises of sweet days.

Joe had said Graham could stay at his girl-friend's place while he looked for somewhere to live. But he had only got to the point of dropping his suitcase there when Joe and Marianne had a quarrel and she moved back in and refused to let Joe visit her even to claim his laundry. Graham didn't know whether his suitcase was also held as hostage or was merely a sheltering passer-by keeping a low profile. It seemed best just to leave it there. So he stayed at Joe's. For a week he lived with most of his clothes impounded by Marianne. It gave the whole episode an air of camping out indeed. It was a small, weatherboard and fibro shack Joe lived in. There was a kitchen and two rooms, with a couch in each. The room that looked across to the city was Joe's study and bedroom. The other room was the living room and that was where Graham slept. It was cramped and ramshackle. But it was like a shelter for the babes in the wood. Tom Sawyer and Huck Fin shacked up together. Joe even had a knife. Boy Scouts' or Swiss Army. Or was that just something he always seemed to be going on about, was it just that there were knives in his stories and though Graham thought he remembered him showing him his Swiss Army or was it Boy Scouts' knife, maybe he just read about it, or maybe Joe read it out to him one of those golden mornings, swivelling round in his vinyl and chromium executive's chair, books and magazines and bulging files banked up around the walls, going through the different blades, and Graham standing there enjoying the warm glow of the sun, the ambience of magazines and books, and nervously sceptical of all this knife stuff. His eyes would slide away to the books in Joe's study, flowing into the living room. They had their

distinct character. The modern writer. It was an American modernity, something not seen so much outside of America. Even Canada had access to French culture. But without any languages Joe made a dynamic out of what had been an unease. So there were few of the mix of European writers that might have been expected. It was brusquely new world. And the journal culture was new world too. *New Yorker, Partisan.* And books on media, journalism, the modern professional writer. Though Joe always said he hated working in journalism.

Mary-Jane came back from the pub with them one evening and they sat in the living room and she rolled a joint or two. Joe declined. He belonged to an earlier generation of Americanophiles, locked in with the lushes of the lost generation. He poured himself a bourbon and Mary-Jane and Graham shared a joint. In the end he loped off to bed in his study and Mary-Jane and Graham made love in the narrow little living room couch.

What Graham couldn't remember was if she said she wanted to make love to them both, Joe and him. It was certainly in the air. But did he walk into Joe's study and ask him ? Phrase it in such a way as to be unencouraging, no doubt ?

'The Mary-Janes are your sort of people,' Joe would've said. Did say, maybe. And Graham would've gone back to the couch empty handed and made his apologies to her. Or maybe it was Mary-Jane who went and made the offer. Or maybe it was never made.

They made love and she told him about the American serviceman she'd fucked the other week or month. He'd been on R and R. from Viet Nam. Rest and recreation leave. He was so young. It was like he knew he was going to be killed.

So the serviceman peopled the early morning hours. Then she left before the dawn, rolled up a smoke to be on the way with and wafted off into the night, she lived just down the street.

'Tell me about it,' Joe said as he sizzled the breakfast sausages.

Graham told him about the soldier.

'He probably gave her an incurable strain of syphilis rife in the third world,' Joe said.

He had a deft touch for playing on your anxieties, Joe.

Was that the reason Graham never made love to her again ? He didn't think so. She was a deft hand at deferment. He remembered a hot evening in late summer in her large airy room. Double doors opening onto a balcony. Louvred shutters filtering out sound, wind and light. The last pangs of deep red sunset in the polluted western sky tinged a few surfaces in a room of predominantly dove grey. Just the momentarily

golden breast, the ruddied cheek, the glowing tip of a joint, and then the soft grey lightness of smoke. All evening she walked around naked, it had been such a hot day. She never once let Graham touch her. She poured beer from the fridge, rolled joints. But he was denied closeness. There's no conversation to recall. She wasn't into talking.

Coming home one night the headlights of the car picked out Joe, huddled into his duffle coat, maybe it was a rainy evening, carrying a bottle, midway between his place and Mary-Jane's. Graham pulled up, the carload of them.

'We were coming to have a drink with you,' they said.

'Now you've got us you don't need to go out,' they assured him.

'Have you got any ice at your place ?' they asked.

So they all went back together, to the little cabin in the pines, one of them might have been a pine, there were all sorts of trees around the place, some huge, some short, none of them tended in any way, not even by their eyes. Anyway, it was too late to notice the garden. Much of their life was lived after dark. They did not rise with the lark.

'What were you up to ?' Graham asked, frying the eggs. Laziness would have had him let Joe make breakfast every day, and if Joe didn't, Graham wouldn't have bothered. But duty suggested he should take his share for, as prudence pointed out, Joe would begin to feel put upon and demand some other and worse contribution to the household economy than breakfast. So on alternate mornings Graham would try and beat him to the stove. That was how he found out that there were power positions and cooking someone breakfast was one of them, and that was something without a doubt known to Joe.

'Up to ?' he said, to cut a long story short, omitting all the delays and gestures and body language, shirt collar stuff.

'Yes, last night.'

'Ah, last night.'

Two golden smiling eggs like sunflowers in the hot morning, spitting and spluttering.

'Mateship,' he said. 'That review you wrote, there are probably some things that you're not able to understand about us. Like mateship.'

'I don't think it's that difficult to understand,' Graham said. heavily. Too heavily. He should have been wary of slipping on oil when frying. There he was in a power position and he just got fobbed off.

'Good then,' Joe said. 'I don't need to explain it to you.'

'Just explain what you were up to last night,' Graham said. Pleasantly. But it was starting to sound unpleasant. Not the sort of thing for sunny mornings.

'But I thought you said you understood, didn't you ?' Joe said, 'or close enough: not that difficult to understand.'

'You're just being evasive,' said Graham.

'Evasion has been the centre of many an acceptable ideology,' said Joe.

'What do you mean ?'

'Indeed, an ideology is an evasion.'

'I'm not talking about mateship,' Graham said. 'I'm asking about what you were up to last night.'

'It's all so clear cut to you,' said Joe.

5: LIBERTARIANISM

'When we die,' said Joe, 'they'll find all these unpublished realist stories hidden away at the back of the drawers in our desks.'

Graham didn't have a desk, but Joe did, with drawers. He was speaking quite literally at this point, Graham suspected. It was a real desk in which these realist stories hid. Not a modernist, conceptual one, not a metaphor.

'In the past when they cleared out writers' desks they found sheafs of unpublished pornography. We publish our pornography. It is realism that is our dirty little secret,' said Joe, 'that is what we try to hide.'

They would go for a drink about five o'clock and after a couple of hours or so have a meal somewhere and then fit in another hour's drinking before the pubs shut. This was always at a second pub, a different pub. There were prescribed rituals here. Joe found them fascinating. Maybe he even initiated them. At five o'clock they would be drinking down towards the Quay, the site of bohemia since the 1890s, down in the Newcastle near where the old *Bulletin* office used to be, where Angus and Robertson's publishing office used to be, and they could still hear the tinkle of broken glass from when Henry Lawson smashed the partition windows in the *Bulletin* office when they wouldn't advance him money. After that he used to beg for the price of a drink from passengers coming off the ferries at Circular Quay. Exacting a toll from visitors to the city that he wrote. The city that one day will be utterly vanished and surviving only in words. They wanted to record it, it was such an exciting city, the sun reflecting off the harbour, off the ferry boat windows and the portholes of the big passenger ships, off the golden middies of beer in the late afternoon, standing out on the sloping pavement that ran down the side of the Newcastle hotel.

Maybe it was a dissatisfaction with their lives that turned them away from realism. They hoped for more. They hoped for more than in their experience they had reason to hope for. They had this belief that things could be continually more interesting. That possibilities were multiple. This may not have been a utopian group but it was progressive in some ways. It was progressive in that it challenged cultural repressions. Working conditions were hard, so why work ? There was a great deal of work put into not working. But an aesthetic of the exploitative conditions of work was not eagerly looked for, socialist realism was deemed passé; not even a native word to denote the dismissive category that indicated the reasons for its absence. Everybody knew work was exploitation. So the smart operators avoided it altogether.

There was a smirking satisfaction in successfully avoiding what all the mugs did every day, work, work, work. Academics were tolerated in this milieu since it was reckoned they were onto a pretty good racket. At the office party for non-workers, who otherwise would have missed out on the annual, ritual piss-ups, and who celebrated it with enthusiasm, academics were allowed to be present on the grounds that they legitimately could claim to do no work. So work understandably had no place in the aesthetic of this world. In the anthologies Joe was to compile in the decades ahead, work was never one of the categories, though play generally was. In this as in many things bohemia had its similarities to Graham's Oxford college. There it had been prohibited to mention either work or a woman's name over dinner. The penalty was sconcing: drinking some huge volume of beer. He couldn't remember whether sconcing still survived at the college or whether it had been outlawed by the progressives. But the prohibition still remained. So down at the Newcastle they avoided mention of work, those who worked. And didn't write about it.

May 1968 Graham heard on the radio, the reporter breathless and authentically terrified as he dodged into Parisian doorways to avoid tear-gas canisters. Well, it seemed authentic at the time. But the explosions of Paris were muted by the time they reached Australia. Conscription, which brought the war in Vietnam back home to the middle class, was the issue. The university students resisted. There were attempts to politicize the struggle, to use it to educate about the true nature of power, to reveal the repressive structures of the state. But the broad liberal base of the movement usually kept the focus on specific issues: the war, conscription. Sometimes one emphasis, sometimes the other. The experience of all the factional struggles and the interactions with hostile authority structures provided the real politicization. There the iron heel was glimpsed in its many and protean manifestations.

Opposition to the war was something Graham could be wholehearted about. All the passionate Protestant fervour that he had repudiated could now find an outlet, an object. The threads of continuity could be maintained with that refusal to join the army cadet force at school. To sit down in front of the university regiment was natural. It had a splendid symbolic rightness. The great Gothic backdrop with its battlements and turrets, memento of Norman aggression. The marching regiment. And people sitting down in front of it. He'd missed the speeches and incitements but the incident itself was one of pure inevitability. And the engineering students and regiment members in mufti dragging them up off the grass.

Joe was distinctly unimpressed. They stood in the bar and Graham told him what had happened which didn't take too long as there wasn't much to tell and Joe gazed reflectively into his beer as if there might have been something swimming for

its life towards the side of his glass. He gave the glass a swirl so whatever it was would have been swept back into the centre again.

'This will probably be remembered as another King and Country debate,' said Joe. 'You will be remembered as one of those who encouraged world war three.'

'You should rather approve of that,' Graham said, 'if war's such a good thing.'

He didn't snap back which Graham had rather expected. Maybe he did think war was a good thing.

'Maybe you should enlist,' said Graham.

'I've already applied to go.'

'You've what ?'

'I've already applied to go.'

'Go where ?'

'To Vietnam.'

'You haven't.' He couldn't believe it, that anyone would want to, let alone Joe. 'What, as a stretcher bearer ?'

'I want to write a book about it.'

'Why don't you go as a war correspondent,' Graham said. Joe sounded serious, and that seemed practical.

'I don't want to go as a war correspondent,' he said. 'I don't want to write journalism. I want to write a book about it.'

Graham thought about it for a while. There seemed obvious practical difficulties. 'They'll never let you do it,' he said.

'Why not ?'

'Because you'll only get their co-operation as long as you say what they want. Once you start to oppose the war, they'll make it impossible for you.'

'I don't intend to oppose the war,' Joe said.

'Why not ?'

'That is not the point of what I'm doing.'

'What else is there to do ?'

'I want to write about men at war,' he said.

'And endorse the war ?'

'Not necessarily,' he said.

'But possibly. Probably. Most likely,' Graham said.

'I am certainly not promoting the spread of communist totalitarianism,' said Joe.

'Just American imperialism,' said Graham

There was a marked pecking order in this anarchist society. There were top people and not top people. For orders and degrees jar not with liberty but well consist, as the mighty Anarch put it. The top people were marked by their pairing off with other top people. You could tell the top men because they paired off with the top women. You could tell the top women because they paired off with the top men. All were not equal. But then, no one ever claimed they were. This was an anarchism set firmly against socialist principles. Socialism was labelled authoritarian and dismissed. Egalitarianism was not a live concept here.

But there was a degree of movement too. It seemed to be possible to fuck your way into being a top person, though this obviously had to be done with some circumspection. This was a society that claimed to reject all taboos. But just to fuck indiscriminately probably meant you couldn't get to be a top person. Discriminations had to be seen to be made.

Marianne was one of those of this top rank. Graham always felt she had the curled lip of contempt for the rest of them who were not of this caste. Tall, blond, imperious. When she suggested they have a fuck Graham was taken aback and surprised and frightened. 'I've got my periods,' she said, 'but you're not one of those people who minds that are you ?' They were in a narrow hallway in some terrace house and a party was going on after the pub. People standing around clutching beer bottles in brown paper bags, drinking flagon wine from kitchen cups, pressed against each other, squeezing past each other. There was always this air of challenge: not only with Marianne. It was part of the notation of the social defiance of the group. And to waver was to be revealed as unsound. Graham knew he was unsound. Either the conservatism or Puritanism of his childhood or the romantic socialist and aesthetic aspirations of his attempted negation of that background would lurch into consciousness. Eric, whom Marianne lived with at that time, this was before she'd left Eric for Joe, Eric was one of the heavies. 'Our leader,' Jo had called him when Graham had asked who was this Eric. A living embodiment of applied anarchism: he never worked: he was big physically and dominated any conversation: he pointed out when you used words like should. Gradually Graham learned to hide should from view. Authority, too: Eric was very firm on not giving authorities recognition by referring to them as authorities. There was a lot of linguistic care required in being a libertarian. But Graham was used to that. Anyone brought up in a class society has learned to recognize the significance of the minutiae of verbal exclusions and inclusions. Sometimes Eric took a labouring job. He was beginning to get unfit, though, now; the age when the body resists. He was a mythic figure but Graham never knew why. He never knew what they myth was, what it expressed. At that time, of course, Graham looked for meaning. He was eager to read nature's mystic book.

Everything was to be interpreted. There was significance, truth, waiting to be transcribed all around. It took him a long time to realize that some things had no meaning, that some myths expressed nothing, that some aesthetic enigmas were just a waste of time, that there was a contrived meaninglessness to waste your energies and stop you from ever discovering let alone spending your time on the worthwhile. These were the years of abstract expressionism, the living death of modernism, the end of ideology ideology, the seed-bed of nihilism and the post-modern.

'Is that your first gun ?' said Joe.

Graham had written a story which had sought resolution with someone stealing an ancient flintlock pistol from the wall of a pub. There was some ambiguity as to whether it had been stolen for use, as heavy menace even if not for firing a lethal shot.

'I don't know,' Graham said. 'I don't think I've ever used one before.'

'What about killing ?' said Joe. 'You'd remember if you'd ever killed anyone. Or tried to.'

'Not my sort of story,' said Graham.

'You remember when you first kill someone.'

Graham couldn't remember anyone killing anyone in any of Joe's stories. Maybe there were stories he hadn't read. The hidden away realist stories.

'I'm not into guns,' Graham said. 'Or knives.' To forestall another demonstration of the Swiss army knife.

'The first killing marks a stage in a writer's development. It's an initiation.'

'I'm not into all these rituals, either.'

'You have no choice,' Joe said.

He proclaimed a fascination with rituals. He would continually talk about the pub in terms of initiations and tribal kinship patterns. Never very specifically. Or maybe it was specific and it passed Graham by because he didn't understand the references. Joe had an odd respect for some of the so called academic disciplines, for dubious conceptual models that privileged inequalities and hierarchies and showed that socialism and co-operation could never be. There were lots of models available. At the time Graham thought Joe had simply been seduced by new labels, ponderous categories whose implications he hadn't realized, underestimating Joe's intellectual rigour here because he overestimated his humanity. In these years Graham still assumed that every writer was naturally of the left, every thinker naturally concerned with the humane, the co-operative. Afterwards he found it hard to know how he had

been able to sustain that belief. But he did. And it sustained him in its turn for years. Years of misapprehension that were also years of hope.

As much as the pub, the dinners were part of the pattern. You would meet somebody in the pub and go off to dinner with them, or arrange to have dinner with them anyway and meet in the pub and then that somebody might have somebody with them and someone else might decide to come along and there would be four, five, eight, ten of you. The Chinese restaurants had huge round tables and long bench tables that could always accommodate another chair or so if someone else wandered in later. And the drinking and arguing would continue, and all the little sexual sub-games relating to past and present and possibly imminent or future connections that individuals had there with each other would cut across and sometimes through their current entanglements or relationships. All amidst the prawn and abalone and bamboo shoots and crisp skinned shicker. And the bottles of beer. DA, KB, Resch's pilsener.

This was before Dixon Street had been turned into Chinatown with arches and lanterns and seats for tourists. This was when it was a street of old warehouse buildings leading off the markets and up from the docks. Signs announcing Bananas, Old Bags. Crates and cabbage leaves lined the streets. Not in huge and impassable quantities, of course, but the trace of the markets. And the restaurants opened up in these gaunt three storey buildings, sometimes on the ground floor with a plate glass window on the street, but more often on a first floor and you entered up a narrow staircase. And then these great, barn-like rooms, often only sparsely filled, curtained off from empty, musty areas. And long-suffering waiters who had watched things come and go and whose blank, white faces like Noh masks in that very blankness expressed a life of toil, of sadness, of expatriation, of lost illusions. They spoke only a little English, old men who had never integrated with this wide south land, whose opium dreams had seen it all and beyond and back again, back again to this bowed, silent shuffling life of toil, bound to the toil or bound to the dream, what was the difference, it was all a bondage and nothing to get free to, no better place, no paradise to hope for, just another turn on the seemingly endless cycle of seems, and might as well be endless for all that mortal time might comprehend it, coming back next time as a cockroach in a kitchen, beaten to death, or a drunken libertarian, slumped on an old wooden café chair in the dark corner of a dark room, with a mess of barely eaten sweet and sour pork on his plate and who knows what in his heart.

Marianne had left Eric for Joe. Eric had a new friend, Gwen. They all had dinner together one night, some other people too, no doubt, and Marianne concentrated her attentions back on Eric and Gwen talked to Graham. The next day Joe warned him, 'I don't think you should start anything with Gwen.'

'I don't think I'd thought of it,' Graham said.

'Good, then,' said Joe. He had that way of saying good that peremptorily cut off any incipient further thought, any continuing development. It was one of his tricks of paternal authority, gleaned from long, bleak years of observing his father.

'But it's quite an interesting suggestion now you mention it,' Graham said. His attitude to paternal intimidation wasn't quite that of Joe's, ambiguous even as it was.

'It's not at all an interesting suggestion and it would only cause trouble.'

'Ah,' Graham said, 'it's for the good of the community I shouldn't start anything. Or respond to anything.'

'Eric's had a difficult time.'

'Poor Eric,' said Graham, aiming for a falseness of tone that would match Joe's concern. 'Over your taking Marianne off him ?'

Was there a silent struggle between self-congratulatory machismo and strategic diplomacy ? 'It isn't as simple as you try to make it sound,' was all Joe said.

'Things never are,' said Graham, 'according to what you tell me.'

'He's in a vulnerable state.'

'And I might shake the foundations of this vulnerable anarchist state if I get off with his girl friend. All are libertarian but some are less libertarian than others, is that it, to adapt one of your reactionary gurus ?'

'No,' he said, 'that's not it.'

Whatever the warning, the order, to keep away from Eric's girlfriend, the terms of compassion for Eric in which it was presented could immediately be disregarded. Graham immediately disregarded it. Compassion was not one of Joe's modes. Graham relished the grotesquery of Joe, having taken away or been taken away by Marianne, preserving Eric's current relationships Later he wondered if perhaps Joe were afraid Marianne might return to Eric, if Eric were deserted by Gwen. Later still he suspected Joe was concerned to maintain an order, locating himself as Eric's equal if not successor by taking his girl. If Graham were to do the same, that would equalize them all. These were not nice speculations. They reduced them all, himself no less than the others. Later still he wondered if there were a political agenda, and the alliance of Eric and Gwen had to be preserved so that a united anarchist leadership could forcefully promote the right to write 'fuck' and 'cunt', mobilise anti-censorship activities to privilege the word, and divert attention

from the substantial issues of the anti-war left. These were not nice speculations either.

They were very much oriented to the word. When you are struggling to establish an identity as a writer, you are likely to be preoccupied with verbal solutions. Words not deeds. These were the days of petitions. Why long lists of names and addresses of people opposing the war or conscription were thought to be effective weapons of political change, no one ever said. Graham just signed them and collected more names. Later he became sceptical. Why make the security services' job easier for them by giving them your name and address when you oppose the order of things ? Even if the security services didn't devise the petitions in the first place, which they might not have, all they had to do was copy down the names and addresses from the advertisements in the newspapers. Even advertising opposition to the war in the newspapers only helped the right-wing newspaper proprietors by giving them advertising revenue. And they were all right-wing, whoever you chose to advertise with.

Joe wasn't eager to sign. He was torn between the image of the writer as public figure, taking positions on public issues, and a recoil from what he referred to, to Graham, as your student radical friends. Graham couldn't understand why he was holding back.

'Get your name in the papers,' Graham said.

'It is not the way I would prefer to have it in the papers,' Joe said.

'Well, you can't not.'

'I can't not ?'

'You'll look like a pro-war reactionary if you don't.'

'How's that ?'

'People will notice you didn't sign.'

'You'll draw their attention to it, is that it ?'

'Not if you prefer not.'

'In politics you should remain within your own sphere,' said Joe.

'Why's that ?'

'It means you stay within your depth. In the community in which you live and work.'

'That's just a way of discouraging participation in larger issues,' Graham said.

But he worried about it. Graham's own strategy had been to keep clear of the politics of his immediate environment. His intuition had been not to cause trouble

close to home. And now Joe would destabilise that base, Joe who didn't work so had no work base to destabilise.

Joe struck again, seeing he had hit some target.

'Trying to remedy world problems is just an avoidance of confronting your daily situation. It's a mark of your failure, generally. The larger the comment on the world situation, the less the private life and the immediate environment can face up to scrutiny. Your student radical friends are just projecting unresolved family conflicts. Unresolved Oedipal complexes.'

But Graham had heard that line too often. That bright idea had been done to death in the press and various suspect, funded publications. Its use of Freudian analysis to reduce the political to the familial and then to reassert parental values had been too obvious a trick. All it did was begin the undermining of his faith in Freudian theory. Something so manipulable by the forces of reaction had to be treated more tentatively.

There always seemed to be a lot of things happening. That was the greatest difference from times before and times since. Even if a lot of things never actually happened, were only the beginnings of hopes or machinations that remained unfulfilled, there was always the sense that things would happen, books would get written, movies made.

But Joe's movie lost its backing.

'Thanks to you and your scruffy radical student friends,' he said.

'Why me ?'

'Because that petition was published in the weekend papers and the backer saw my name and withdrew his backing.'

'Well, you wouldn't want to be backed by somebody with those sorts of views, anyway,' Graham said, 'would you ?'

Then they were thrown out of the house they were sharing. Bye bye little wooden house. Bye bye pink flowers of oleander and old, orange hibiscus. Bye bye those dark little rooms with their litter of blankets and books and beer cans and bourbon bottles. Marianne had somehow worked things to have them thrown out and to take possession herself. This was about the time Joe went on educational radio and denounced her. In answer to the question has anyone been of influence and inspiration in your writing, he said one person had been phenomenally destructive and brought his talent to its knees and her name was Marianne. And he'd given her a

gift of all seven drafts of one of his stories and she'd thrown them all away. Something like that. Graham didn't hear it. Very few people did. It was not a high-rating programme. But that only helped the myth to grow. Down at the pub there was a new era of creativity as the boys thought up all the horrible things they'd like to say about the girls on radio and told you them as accounts of what Joe had said. It sealed their fate, there was no way Marianne would relent. Perhaps that was what Joe wanted at some level, as they used to write then.

So Graham was at last impelled to look for somewhere to live with some urgency. He'd been staying with Joe while he looked and Jan was seeing her parents. It was all very strange he did concede. But now the interlude had come to an end. Graham found a house to live in and Jan rejoined him. Since Joe had nowhere to go, he came along too. While he looked for somewhere to live. Even at the time Graham knew it was not a very good idea, and after a while Jan left altogether.

6: VIETNAM PROTEST

The war in Vietnam was the first television war, the media war, the media people said. Brought into the living room of the American people. Well, Graham didn't have a television and wasn't in America. Television programmed rubbish and offered no lures. Later it offered lures, though was no less rubbish. Later he adjusted to it, this the aim, the ambition, the pharmakon, the nepenthe, sitting in front of the beams hour after hour, wondering how to get in there, to be on the box. But that was after the war was over and there were no longer demonstrations and protests and readings and the alternative press to occupy the time. After the war was over television came into its own as the great domestic controller. And not only in the house, but in the pubs too, with its endless screening of horse racing and car racing and mud wrestling. And in the pubs where there wasn't television, and in some where there was, music was introduced so no one could talk protest and politics or anything else for that matter any more, the music was so loud.

But Vietnam: so easy to glide away from it, the topic too large, too violent, too present, too meaningful, how do you write about that, what has that got to do with literature, they would say in the university.

The Iliad ?

But who reads *The Iliad* any more ? Actually reads it ? The *Odyssey,* yes: coming home from the war, sex and drugs and siren songs, adventure, movement, the voyage. And that was yet another sailing away from it.

There wasn't even an International Brigade. A literary death for communism. Too thirties. Was anybody actually volunteering to fight for communism ?

You didn't need television to know about the war. The images spread. Images from news cameramen, moving or still. The Buddhist monk in flames, the gun to the head of the about to be shot, the women fleeing.

There was an aesthetic ranking of the verité image. Wow, what a picture, imagine.

He couldn't bear to. Who would want to imagine Vietnam ? Who would want to imagine napalm, summary execution, severed limbs, death, maiming.

He wanted no images of this, these were images not to be preserved, images that needed no preservation, images that could never be expunged.

When he was ten or eleven Graham was conscripted to sell poppies for the blind. He remembered having to stand at the entrance of the cinema. The manager let them in to

watch the feature for free, but he could remember neither who he was with nor what the movie was. Now here he was again, outside a cinema, handing out anti-Vietnam war leaflets, and again the name of the movie is forgotten. It was all so obviously so traumatic an experience that anything that could be was repressed. Presumably they were opposing the movie. He didn't enjoy this sanctimonious role, holier than thou, collector of coins for the blind and dispenser of propaganda for peace. And the unknown quantity of the public's reaction always gave it that edge of fear. It was an experience he could well have done without. And other than to say he must have experienced it he recalled nothing of it. Except the soldier. Young, eighteen or nineteen, hair short back and sides, he came up to Graham, in the street outside the cinema.

'Keep it up, mate,' he said. 'Good on you. It's fucking terrible there, mate, I can fucking tell you. Keep it up, mate, I reckon you guys are doing the right thing.'

In the Forest Lodge.. Appropriate place for hunters' yarns, though not quite what the name might suggest, it was the pub closest to the university. He was there one afternoon in the beer garden and an American joined them, on R&R from Vietnam. The feeling was not very friendly towards Americans, the war was perceived as their aggression, Australia dragged into it, an unjust war whether they'd been dragged into it or not, a brutal destruction of a foreign people. But he weathered the vibes, this determined American, sat down, was he looking for congenial company around campus instead of the whores laid on by the CIA associated operation that controlled and catered for the R&R in Australia ? Or was he another part of the CIA operation snooping around looking for dissidents. Operation Phoenix (Australia). Conversation was constrained. But he did concede, yes, there were chopper pilots who no doubt went out shooting villagers like they were deer, as off-duty recreation. It was a recent news story somewhere or other, and he conceded yes, he had heard of such things. Though it didn't seem to figure largely in his assessment of the situation, in the context of what was going on daily in Vietnam it was clearly hardly remarkable.

Readings against the war. Lunch-time readings on campus. He calculated it with an entrepreneurial eye: the potential audience for readings would be augmented by the political conscience audience, by those who wanted to register a protest against the war but wanted to do it relatively painlessly, and going to a reading offered an alternative to marching or rallying or shouting. It was capitalizing on the mood of the moment and showing that fiction and poetry were part of that full world of the

political, the contemporary, of life and death; not something contained in a syllabus or a gallery, not something quarantined off in a new critical nonsense of 'purely literary values.' They read in galleries, too. Anywhere. It was a way to build up an audience, to present what the syllabus controllers tried so hard to prevent. And you could have an audience with the lure of anti-war and a name that had some exposure. There were no big names. Big names were all foreign. Writers didn't get big names in Australia at this point.

When it came to doing an anthology of anti-war, that became the focus of battle. There was a scheme for a slim volume, elegant protest, chosen voices, the quivering few. Graham argued for something wider-reaching, getting as many writers as possible, as full a range as they could afford space for. This way some new names could be introduced and some elided and blacklisted ones restored. He heard someone had begun an anthology in Melbourne. That wasn't surprising. What was surprising was that it hadn't been done before. He went to Melbourne and found the project had fallen through; but he returned with what had been collected, a swag of avant-garde protest, another world of experiment and innovation and coteries. Together with the work already gathered it tipped the scales, swamped the élite selection. And the long search for a publisher began. So did the resentment of the élite, the names poised soon to be big names under the appropriate foreign aegis.

Why attempt to capture the tone and mood of that time when it was a mood and tone of innocence, ignorance, inauthenticity and delusion ? Who were these figures who emerged as leaders of protest, focii of dissent, and how can they properly be represented without their later roles as media personalities, lawyers, computer specialists, economic advisers ? Could they ever have been authentic, or were they all government men and women all along, on the first threshold of their careers with the great multinationals, putting in their three years undercover ? Once you started to ask that, of course, everyone began to look inauthentic.

He walked down in one of the demonstrations with Iggy Noble. A couple of uniformed senior police policing the march raised a hand in acknowledgment at Iggy who smiled back, waving, saluting. Old activists known to the police. The image hung there, the smiling cop, flat hat, raised hand.

'That magazine Iggy ran,' Graham said to Joe.

'The one that folded with the first issue.'

'Well, after the first few. That could have been a total fraud. It could have been a CIA operation, just to get the names and addresses of subscribers. They really pushed for subscribers. They collected mailing lists off every left wing group they could. Maybe that's what he was doing those years he was overseas. Training at a secret CIA base.'

'You shouldn't go around saying these sort of things,' said Joe.

'Why not ?'

'Because you don't know if they're true. You've got no evidence, it's all conjecture. You could harm someone's career.'

He supposed so. He could be maligning and defaming an innocent person. But he was still surprised at the vigour of Joe's attack, it made him uneasy, that he might have been defaming Iggy in the joy of creation, the excitement of the chase, following a narrative thread wherever it might lead, while Joe took the part of the censor, of responsibility, of care for the innocent. It hardly seemed a characteristic role. But there again Joe had had his own magazine that lasted only half a dozen issues and it was easy to forget that he might still be touchy about such forgotten moments.

Shelter a draft resister on the run. Show solidarity. Practical support, romantic gesture, complicity. Participation in the events of history. There weren't that many public draft resisters. A handful. The way to get out of the draft was to register and hope your number didn't come up. You had a good chance it wouldn't. If it did, you faked the medical. A code of convention emerged: bedwetting, asthma, anxiety. The army didn't want conscripts who didn't want to be there: not in a military situation: the Americans were losing too many officers to disaffected troops. If they figured you were trying to get out of it, you tended to get out of it. Pamphlets on how to fail your medical were readily available.

But there was also the campaign against registering for the draft in the first place. Here you recorded your heady defiance by not registering. In effect it was a loyalty oath for eighteen year old males and those who refused to register identified themselves immediately as subversives, unless they had the indemnity of provocateurs.

To have a leader of the Don't Register movement staying while the police had a warrant for his arrest was to endorse that ambiguous movement. Did Graham realize the ambiguities ? Was this indeed the process through which he first began to recognize the advantages of passive evasion over head-on opposition ? The resister and his wife stayed for a week, playing military marches on the record player.

Occasionally they would phone up the Commonwealth Police to taunt them. Here we are, come and catch us.

'Get off the phone,' Graham would say, 'they'll trace it if you keep on talking.'

'Don't worry,' they waved, and brought the conversation to a leisurely end with all the civilized politenesses that ending a conversation required. They were well brought up law students. No unseemly curtailment.

Graham's publisher was down one time and encountered the draft resister, phoning away. He looked worried, the publisher, he was unhappy about all this involvement.

'You should stick to fiction,' he said. 'When's the novel coming along ?'

But he was an American. Graham discounted the advice.

The worried look, though, hung there, a concern the full depths of which Graham never cared to plumb.

This was when he was living in what Joe used to refer to as the Gatsby house. If the police came the draft resister would have to escape by water, row out into the harbour. Romantic, dramatic, filmic.

The Commonwealth Police came round the University with photographs of wanted draft resisters. They came into the History Common Room, showed them to the staff, asking if anyone had seen them.

'Oh,' said Soumyen, 'all these white faces, they all look the same to me.'

'Of course they won't stop the war because a lot of kids and clergymen go around protesting. The only thing that will stop them is losing it.'

'So what's the point of the protest movement ?'

'It annoys them. It gives them apoplexy and heart attacks and strokes and cancer.'

'Yes ?'

'Permanent protest,' said Chris. 'What else is there to do ?'

They sat with their feet on the table at the window and looked at the harbour. They had a flagon of wine between them and smoked some dope and looked out on the night.

'What are those flashing red lights in the water ?' Chris asked.

'Ammunition barges.'

'I thought they were. Imagine if someone blew them up. Put a time fuse on them. Swam out there. What a blast ! The gas tanks would all go up.'

On the water's edge were storage tanks for petroleum.

'Probably should wait till a tanker's in. Maximise the flammable materials. I wonder how much of the city it would take out. If all the barges detonated....You'd only need to set off one or two, the others would set each other off. Though I guess it would be good to detonate the petrol storage places too. You'd have to plan it in detail.'

They sipped the wine and watched.

'You know, I should have gone in the army instead of dodging the draft.'

'Yes ?'

'Yes. Should have gone and learned about explosives and weapons. The left was real dumb not to enlist. You know, I've been thinking about a scheme to paralyze the city. Remember when that tanker spilled oil on the harbour bridge; the traffic was piled up till midnight. The whole city was immobilized. Immobilized Think of that.'

The still night, the black harbour.

'What you do is wait for a rainy night. You've got to have rain for the chaos, but not heavy rain that would wash the oil away. You could paralyse the place with strategic oil spills. Then you'd have to break into the control room of the television cameras that watch the traffic and demonstrations and everything. There's someone up there taping it all, you know that ? Just get up there at rush hour and hold them up. Take over the controls. You could create total chaos from that control room. And you could watch when the police started to come or anything. You could put out all the traffic lights. Imagine that.'

'How would you get away with it ?'

'You'd have to work on it but I reckon it's possible. Anyway, if it was a revolution you wouldn't want to get away, you'd be there to take control.'

'And what would you do then ?'

'I don't know,' said Chris. 'It's crazy, it would be so easy to take control but no one ever thinks they can really do it so they don't even work out a scenario. They've got no real belief in revolution, any of them, any of those splinter groups. Three communist parties, four Trotskyite parties, all these workers' parties and revolutionary parties. Why don't they just seize control ? Why don't they work out what they'd do when they got control ? It would be easy in a city like this. It would be easy to do the whole country. All you've got to do is work out a plan for six cities. Maybe we should do a book on it. Scenarios of the revolution. A scenario for every major city. Maps, plans, diagrams. You could give alternative strategies. You could list all the people you'd need to round up and so on. Work address, home address. You could show all the crucial offices and civil defence places and bomb shelters and police radio shelters and emergency services. Just imagine if you knocked out the

central police transmitter, they wouldn't be able to do anything. Or you could seize one of the FM stations and transmit on the police frequency and jam it. What do you reckon ?'

'They gave me this ring in Hanoi,' Germaine said. 'They gave me two of them, actually. They're made from shot down American fighters. I want to give it to somebody. To somebody who would appreciate it.'

The demonstrations on the university front lawn, rallies before demonstrations. Graham went to them but he preferred not to speak at them and there was never any shortage of people wanting to speak, address the crowds through a microphone. It held no attractions for Graham. Or did it, and was he repressing them ? Or was the sense of power and exhilaration that hung there as a temptation readily balanced by a knowledge of the potential for disaster, derision, the crowd turning. He was suspicious of demagoguery, performance. He neither wanted to be good at it nor bad at it. It wasn't something terribly difficult to do: a matter of morality and scruples as much as technique. But so was writing. He spoke at one or two meetings, introduced speakers. The last one ended in a mass onslaught on the lecture theatre where the attorney-general was speaking. Graham found himself with Chris against the doors. 'Shall we smash them in ?' said Chris. It was a heady moment but it didn't seem like a good idea. They edged aside to talk while the crowd pushed and was pushed forward. Graham watched one of the anarchists pushing solidly from behind. He had the build of a football player and the manner of a coach and later became a high-profile exponent of anti-state, free enterprise monetarism beloved by the right through the eighties. Graham didn't enjoy being pushed from behind or from any other direction. He had never been fond of football players. And he didn't see that breaking down doors would stop the war. Once you damaged property the wrath of the bourgeois state knew no end. There was a heady derring-do direct action spirit promoted by the anarchists, and what was always noticeable was they pushed from behind and theirs were never the dirty hands. Writing, you had a better chance to consider who was doing the pushing. Once you moved to the theatre of action you were in a different arena, even more duplicitous and treacherous.

How could you write about Vietnam ? If you were there, perhaps you could record something. But why would you be there ? What would you be doing if you were there and whose side would you be on ? Yet if you weren't there, how could you write

about it ? And to write about it, what did that achieve ? The critique of war through the portrayal of war. The argument for peace through the presentation of napalm burns, dead villagers, tortured communists. It wasn't the sort of thing he ever wanted to see or hear. The utter ambiguity of the exposé froze there for him. The loving rendering of murder and violence under the guise of protest, the sheer aesthetic perfection, craft and technique enlisted in the service of art, verité killings. So you turn your back on the war and what do you write then, maybe you explore the roots of the war in your own society, but how do you do that ? That would be a big project, to substantiate it. Though to guess, to stab in there intuitively, that wasn't so hard. The other approach offered was to say although you didn't write about the war, your style, your critical attitude, the texture of your prose was its own critique, it was all a matter of form, not content, of the sufficiently honed prose, the polished perceptions. The war itself was an intrusion into this rarer world of form. He didn't want to be in that rare world any more than in Vietnam.

Lunch-time readings against the war, though a welcome variant on talks by political scientists, were very ordered, restrained, contained. There was a move for something larger, total theatre, rock bands, jugglers. One of the draft resisters had a birthday and said to his parents, 'Don't give me gifts, just pay-roll a couple of rock bands for an all-night be in.'

So they ran leads out of the downstairs rooms in the quadrangle and set up lights so it could be filmed and a sound stage for the rock bands and the people reading stories and poems had a difficult time holding the audience, while round the edges prowled pro-war college boys and engineers. The lawns that were not to be walked on were walked on and then the lawn walkers wanted further excitement. They had broken the taboo and waited for something to open up. The consciousness battles ensued. There were those who were happy to sit round in a semi-circle and listen to rock, and their only arguments were with people in front of them who stood up instead of sitting down; but there were others who wanted to break into the vice-chancellor's office and liberate the files, and there were others who climbed around on the roofs like mountaineers, fulfilling some long felt need to conquer those heights, and then in one corner a couple were dancing and the girl took off her top and this attracted a circle around them. This was a time when bare breasts were rare to public view, before topless beaches, before the introduction of colour television and the bare breasts that came to promote it. A ring of eager males stood around her cheering, more, more, they called, get it all off. But she didn't. It was after that that a fire was lit of all the underground papers brought along to give away, and the flames offered

some phallic release for the frustrated watchers as burning pages of social analysis and anti-war propaganda and dope advocacy and comics and sexuality wafted upwards and danced around within the dark walls of the quadrangle and headed for the roof. Graham felt they'd unleashed forces he would rather not have unleashed. While down on the grass a sleeping bag totally zipped up and enclosed wriggled around like a jumping bean as a couple screwed inside it and the circle formed round about them.

Then they tried cleaning up the rubbish. The less lying around to set fire to the better. But Joe came by and kicked over the rubbish bins in the name of libertarianism. 'Don't be prefects,' he said prefectorially. 'Why should you clear up ? Why recognize authorities ? You wouldn't clear up after the vice-chancellor's tea-party, why should you clean up after this ?' It was the sort of anarchism that appealed to the *jeunesse dorée*; leave it for the servants. Later it looked like deliberate provocation, at the time it was just annoying. But the place didn't burn down, they were greatly relieved nothing caught fire except the piles of newspapers, the half-naked girl illuminated in the flickering light.

In the midst of all this came the revelations about the CIA. How the Central Intelligence Agency had funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the magazines *Encounter, Partisan Review, Preuves, Quadrant.* Australia was part of the network. It was world encompassing. They had funded a similar network of international student organizations too. These were surprises and not surprises. Various editors expressed surprise and resigned their positions. Not in Australia. In Australia the editors said they didn't know, hadn't known, but weren't worried anyway, didn't feel uncomfortable, carried on as before.

The rumours had been around for years. To have them confirmed, to have the full specificity emerge, or something of it, was not something anyone needed to be surprised about. That was part of the horror of it, that it all fitted into place so predictably, at some level it must all have been known and repressed, preferred not to be known. But after the brief flurry of the revelation of what already had been suspected came the most interesting questions. What was the point ? The global suborning of intellectual life. The conscription of literature to covert political ends. Was it as simple and as total as that ? What about specifics ? No doubt there were minor functions in the organization or on the magazines that could have been used for cover; it let people have some ostensible work and income and put them in contact with all the visiting luminaries and all the resident luminaries they might ever want to meet or visit, making contact with people who might be useful contacts, arranging the

invitations and funding for the spring seminars and summer schools. But what else ? It was better to overestimate the intelligence of intelligence agencies than to accept the official media accounts of bumbling and incompetence. Stupidity was too uninteresting, anyway. Graham wanted a narrative of deeper complexity. He couldn't believe that the editors and advisory editors never knew the source of the funding. They knew the congress wasn't devoted to intellectual freedom except in a cold war, anti-communist, support American foreign policy and domestic policy way. They had to know that, everyone had to know that, otherwise the whole propaganda exercise was a disaster. The magazines might proclaim cultural freedom and run their token stories and poems but the real point was not the low high-culture pages but propagandizing the American way. Of course it was possible that some of the editors had thought, here is a great source of finance, let us not inquire too closely but just get some of the funding, we will pretend our values are their values and we will run some of their token rubbish but our real purpose is something else. And who would ever know what their real purpose was or might have been ? Finding a place for literature in the homes of diplomats and businessmen ? Finding a source of patronage so they could invite their old friends to well paid seminars and publish their papers in well-produced journals, and get invited back in return ? It was a nice theory that some of the editors were taking the CIA for a ride, but was it very likely that you could take an intelligence agency for a ride, unless they wanted you to.

Unless you had a CIA vision, unless you took the cold war seriously, unless you saw an imminent apocalyptic confrontation between capitalism and communism fought on every level including in the minds and hearts of the intelligentsia, it was impossible to comprehend. Apart from that there weren't any other stakes. So back in the files some section chief could record, seventeen major articles in support of US policy objectives and castigating Soviet policy placed in a premier English language intellectual journal, and his quota had been to place fifteen. And the editors of all the funded magazines could write reciprocally for each other, a poem here, a travel diary there, a book review or a review article always on hand. It looked like the magazines had their elegant articles and their prestigious names; and the prestigious names kept up their prestige by keeping their names in print, though without having to write anything too demanding; and the section chiefs could keep up their propaganda war quota of heavy stuff; and nobody had to struggle to place articles in resistant papers; and then various writers not involved in the whole deal would offer work or would be solicited for work and they were too involved in their own writing and ambitions to examine the structure of the magazines too closely and anyway they wanted publication and so they were drawn in; and gave this air of independence and prestige and respectability and openness to the ramshackle project that it was. It gave the

mediocre who were ready to be suborned the chance of free trips, expensive seminars, prestigious publications; it gave the once distinguished the chance to keep their name alive, to potter along without ever having to write the book they were going to write. And in the end it became the only game in town.

And then there was the darker sense that there was a deeper plan beneath it all, which would alter the definition of what was being got out of it. Why suddenly now was the truth, if it was the truth, revealed, when suspicions had been around for years? Graham couldn't imagine that they couldn't have stopped the stories had they wanted to, paying somebody off here, running over somebody in a laundry van somewhere else. Which made it look like they'd wanted the revelations, as if they had even set them up. Maybe they knew secrets couldn't be kept for ever, maybe the life of an operation like this was limited like American motor vehicles, so the operation was designed to capitalise on the inevitable ultimate exposure. An operation is set up to fund magazines and draw into them all the social democrat, left liberal intellectuals. There was no need to draw in communists, they had their own organization, the FBI funded seventy-five per cent of the American communist party's subscriptions, the only thing that kept the party solvent, and that ensured that the FBI knew what was going on, ensured that nothing was going on. The communists could be left to the FBI, and this operation could concentrate on the left liberals. All the beautiful people who believed in intellectuals. Before intellectual became a dirty word. And the whole point was to make intellectual a dirty word. The whole point was for the ultimate exposure of the CIA funding, to show how cheap intellectuals were, to show how easily you could suborn writers and film reviewers and men of letters and cultural commentators and professors of literature and angry young novelists. Who was ever going to trust those social democrat leftists again, now that the source of their secret funding was revealed ? Who was ever going to believe in the concept of impartial, dispassionate, disinterested criticism from the universities when their academics had leapt into the seminars and junkets and magazines that the CIA had funded ? Who would ever believe in the integrity of any organization any longer now the CIA rules on how to handle organizations had been made public ? 'Use legitimate, existing organisations; disguise the extent of American interest; protect the integrity of the organization by not requiring it to support every aspect of official American policy.' Now everyone would suspect everything of having been suborned. Revealing the secret guidelines was the ultimate stage in the operation, the clinching manoeuvre, now there could never be trust again.

But to get too preoccupied with the historicity of the revelations and fail to realize that more of the same things were still going on and would continue to go on, was a mistake. A lure. Exploring the past betrayals, indicting the complicit figures,

was marvellous for the youth rhetoric of the movement. It meant that everything of the past could be repudiated as suborned. Never trust anybody over thirty. It allowed the belief that this was a new order coming, that the activists were involved in a generational struggle, and the young were pure and clean and uncorrupted by all those cold war deadlinesses. It diverted attention away from the manipulation of the movement. Obviously the same sort of operation had to be continuing, phoney protest, phoney radicalism, phoney publications.

Again, did anyone want to look too closely when they were having such a good time? Having vowed not to publish in *Quadrant*, Graham had no wish to go round checking on the credentials of every other publication. What would be left ? Increasingly they all began to look phoney, fronts and mind-control stations. But if the explicit revelations had never come, then this process of suspicion could never have developed. Suspicion was clearly part of the fail-safe design of the original operation; when the operation was ultimately revealed, it would continue to be effective in its very revelations, the paranoia generated could serve only to paralyse, evidence of manipulation leading to a mistrust of any co-operative activity for fear of the inauthenticity of the others.

The rhetoric of conspiracy, of course, had been unavailable for years; dismissed to the margins as sensational, silly, immature, fantastic, so that the range of expressible causality had become extraordinarily reduced. The revelations allowed the reintroduction of conspiracy to literature, the exploration of paranoia. Yet how did you write about it unless you were in it ? How did you capture this narrative of bad faith, of the suborning and manipulation of a 'free' culture ? Retrospectively you could see the signs of what had been done. It provided a stimulus to literary history; it provided some points for literary criticism, it gave a meaning and significance to that cultural stress on ambiguity and irony. 'Angleton boasted to me that he had recruited some of the best minds of the New Critics and poets into the OSS, where their facility at teasing out seven types of ambiguity from a text served them well in the interpretations of intelligence data.' (*Harpers*, October 1983) And if they were there in the OSS in the war, who could doubt that they were there in its successor organisation through the cold war, when Angleton was a deputy director of the CIA ? Decoding the ambiguities of enemy intelligence soon led to the creation of ambiguity in their own literary production. Days spent in decoding and discovering what a targeted text meant were succeeded by nights of creating texts no one should ever decode. And it was certainly safer to say nothing that could be decoded. American modernism.

It was a huge revelation, the CIA's intervention in cultural production. And from that you could assume that other agencies of other free world nations had

similarly intervened. And conceive of other, infinite sorts of intervention. It brought into question the whole literary world. Well, that was a good thing. Over the years he tried to embody it in fictional form, tried to draw on the material for a novel, but he could never succeed. The material seemed recalcitrant, unrewarding. He could conceptualise it, intellectualise it, theorise it, and in the end he had to leave it at that. Why try to raise it to the status of art, why try to memorialise it in that way ? It was an intrusion, an excrescence, a growth. It was a part of the picture, it should not be excluded, in any true picture it could not be excluded. But it remained the untransmutable dregs of anti-art, anti-life, Anti-Christ.

7. MOVIE MAKING

Film was the great lure, the will o'the wisp of moving light. That was what they wanted at that time, to make a movie. To be translated into transparency. To be projected. Onto what, into what, that was beyond their projections. They were enthralled by the idea of it, entranced by the vision.

Print is dead, people kept saying. Ah well, they thought, not arguing, print can be transmuted into film. That was what they sought, complicit in their own erasure. Yet what was print anyway but objectified handwriting ? And what was fiction but the unsatisfied sexual yearnings of the diary and what were they but the congelations of reverie, displacement of the erotic imagination onto the lined sheets ? How could film be any less sexual than the pen between thumb and forefinger ? Just more expensive, more mechanical, the eye pressed to the camera's tiny aperture. Movies were what you were supposed to go to with sexual partners, or prohibited from going to. Instead of caressing the book binding you caressed the partner, while you watched continental movies with sex and empty beaches, lonely walks and anguish. Graham had beach scenes. Graham had anguish. He could envision slow movies with patterns of still estuaries and mudbanks crossed by the prints of wading birds. What sort of prints would they be, he wondered.

The script became the cover for Chris's sexual adventures. He would say to Rachel he was going to Graham's to work on the script and then visit his girlfriend. Graham called one night.

'He said he was going round to you,' said Rachel.

'Oh, he could've arrived after I left.'

'He went ages ago.'

'Maybe he went somewhere on the way.'

'I'm sure,' Rachel said.

'No, somewhere legitimate.'

'Legitimate ? Why do you say legitimate ?'

'I guess you made me nervous,' Graham said.

'Why ?' she said.

So from the start the whole project was a subterfuge as far as Rachel was concerned. It became impossible to refer to it, it carried such a heavy resonance of illicit meaning. So Graham had to meet Chris secretly, under the guise of something

else, because to say that they were meeting each other to discuss the movie caused immediate disbelief and deep suspicion on the part of Jan and Rachel.

'I've heard of putting a newspaper to bed,' said Rachel, 'but this is ridiculous. And don't think I'm going to fuck you just because Chris is having it off with some tart.'

Graham opened his mouth and closed it and said nothing.

'I found him in the gutter and made him into a director,' Rachel said.

'It's true,' Chris would say, giggling, 'amazing when you come to think of it.'

Joe moved in with Rachel and Chris moved in with his girlfriend and script development was the cover under which Chris revisited Rachel, till Joe moved all Chris's film cans out of the house onto the front verandah and refused to let him in. So after that Chris just worked on the movie in his girlfriend's single room flat, where she found him, the girlfriend, screwing the continuity girl the night before shooting began. They'd been out on preproduction work that evening, Chris and Graham, driving round with the sound man and the camera assistant making sure they had a crew who knew they started shooting the next day. They started under somewhat overcast conditions, consequently, the continuity girl demure and silent unless spoken to, Chris somewhat ashen from a night of explanations, the sound man moodily self-righteous since he'd discovered the continuity girl and she should have been in his sphere of influence the way he saw it.

The cameraman got very excited when he filmed the naked scene in the bush, peering through the gums at the male lead undressing the star. He threw himself on the soil of National Park and howled. They all peered from their vantage points, the cameraman and the camera assistant and the sound recordist and the sound assistant and the continuity girl and Chris and Graham. At a young man undressing a young woman. This was movies. Breasts and pubic hairs. Female ones. The laboratory refused to process the film. Those were the sorts of days it was, that was why the cameraman got so excited, he hadn't seen that much female nudity in his lens, not as much as he'd been led by his desires and imagination to believe he would see. Now it was the dawning of the age of nakedness. What cinema was really about. The story just the scaffolding for full frontal nudity. It marked a huge shift in the culture. And there they were. At the unveiling of that movement. One of the unveilings. She was really amazing to look at. She was their pin up. Their unapproachable. But she let them watch her appear naked, rustling there in the undergrowth. It wasn't in the script, not explicitly. They'd hoped she'd do it for them, all those men, but until the take they

didn't know she would. But not the male lead. She couldn't get him to take his underpants off.

It was not the story Graham had had in mind for a movie. There were no lone and level sands. But Chris liked it.

'It's the only one, Graham baby,' he said.

'What do you mean, it's the only one ?'

'Forget it, they're all marvellous, I love them all, but this is the one I want to do.'

With the neighbour masturbating by lantern light. They got a performance poet to take on the part. But when it came to sticking his prick through a knot hole in the fence and jerking off while the female lead turned the hose on him, or it, since except for it he was protected by the fence, he couldn't come at it. Modesty intervened.

'Offer him more money, Graham baby,' said Chris.

'We're over budget.'

They tried the person whose backyard they were shooting in. He'd been a child actor once, years ago. It would add a nice touch. A frisson in the credits for the film buffs. But he couldn't get it up either. He came out in his Chinese dressing gown, all golden dragons huffing and puffing, and Chris drilled another knot hole in the fence at the appropriate height, but the flesh refused. His girlfriend took him off into the kitchen and he came back down the steps beaming but by the time he'd got in position he'd lost it.

'This fucking film's unfuckingfilmable,' said the cameraman, 'who wrote this fucking script ?'

Graham went off into the laundry to work on it. Maybe it was unfuckingfilmable but at least he could try.

'O.K.,' he said.

'Clear the set,' said the sound man.

'Don't fucking clear the set,' said Chris from the outside toilet, 'bring on the dancing girls, give us a break.'

'Action,' called the cameraman.

The camera rolled on Graham fucking a wooden fence.

'Cut,' called the cameraman, who seemed to have taken over directing.

Graham withdrew and Chris came rushing out to take over.

'Action,' he called.

'Rolling,' said the cameraman, and more footage of fence-fucking was shot. Then the cameraman wanted to get on camera, and they were shooting a third take.

'How's it look for continuity ?' said the cameraman.

The continuity girl chewed her pencil and shrugged.

Then they packed up and went down to the Botanical Gardens to shoot symbolic and suggestive trees all afternoon. Graham felt weird. And the star hadn't been there to watch. But she'd see the rushes, all of them jerking off through the fence.

Then there was the morning Chris didn't show. They hung around awhile, sat in the sun.

'This is the scene we were going to shoot,' Graham said to the cameraman.

'Well let's fucking shoot it,' he said.

'I guess so.'

'OK.,' said the cameraman, 'say it.'

'Say what ?' said Graham.

'Camera.'

'Camera.'

'Sound.'

'Sound.'

'Action.'

'Action.'

The camera rolled. The male lead walked down the steps. The camera kept on rolling.

'Fucking say it,' said the cameraman.

'Say what ?' Graham said.

'Cut.'

'Oh, OK., that's fine.'

'Fucking say it.'

'Cut,' said Graham.

'Louder,' the cameraman said, still rolling.

'Cut,' said Graham.

Then Chris showed up. He'd dropped an acid trip last night, Graham baby, shit man, triperoo.

They sat round while he drank coffee and looked at the knot holes in the fence.

But they wrapped it up in the end. Returned the house to its occupants who were in process of breaking up and as soon as the movie was shot, parted. It was good of them to wait till the shooting was over, it save problems of continuity, given that they were dividing up the furniture and artworks.

There was a party and Graham talked to Chris's girlfriend, Valerie. They didn't really get along.

'Why do you wear so many clothes ?' she said. 'What a freak. What's with these jackets ? Why do you wear shoes like that ?'

The party was on a houseboat and they talked a bit and then went out in a rowing boat and fucked. They rowed as far as they figured was out of sight. But they might as well have not bothered since she told Chris all about it, or some of it.

'Why did you do it, Graham baby ?' Chris asked him, his hands encased in the cotton gloves you wear to handle film.

They'd got to the neg. cutting stage, working hour after hour in a studio they'd borrowed over Easter.

Why did he do it ? He had no answer. It wasn't a question he'd ever thought to answer. It was just something you did. When the occasion arose. He could've asked Chris, 'Why do you do it ?' but that might have seemed combative and he didn't want to seem combative, he wanted to get the film cut, and he had no expectation of a meaningful answer anyway.

It was impossible to tell the time of day or night down in the studio, there were no windows, no outside light. At some point Valda and Tina turned up tripping on acid. That didn't clarify the time. They went off to Chris's place and Chris fucked Tina and Graham fucked Valda. Valerie was away but she found out about it because Christ got the clap from Tina.

'Why did you do it, Graham baby, what was the idea ?'

'I guess we sort of wanted to communicate or something.'

'Communicate, really ?'

'Something like that. Relate.'

'Relate.'

Then there was another party and the performance poet came up and said he'd heard the movie looked good, he'd seen Valda the other night and she'd said it looked good.

Jan said, 'How come Valda's seen it, is that what's going on ?'

They left the party and quarrelled all the way home in the car and Graham dropped her off and said, 'That's it,' and went back to the party or Valda's or somewhere.

'No, don't go,' Jan said, 'I was just upset, don't go.'

But he did. And when he got back to the house a couple of days later she'd gone, and taken the curtains and blankets and the various things she deemed were hers.

8. THE STOCKYARD

Joe was editing an anthology, Best Stories of whenever it was. The year the war ended.

'You can have a look at them,' he said to Graham. 'Tell me the works of genius I've missed.'

'How can I tell the works of genius you've missed from what you've selected?

'You can look at what I've rejected.'

So he did. Look at what Joe had rejected. And what he might have missed, too. He sat in the serials room of the university library one evening and looked through the current periodicals, to see what new talent was emerging. They took it seriously, this gatekeeper role. The evening fading over Victoria Park, turning through the pages of the quarterlies.

'I'm meeting Perrot,' said Joe.

'He's great,' said Graham.

'Great,' said Joe.

'He's the best. One of the best, anyway.'

'One or the other,' said Joe, 'no doubt, even if you have doubt.'

'I don't have any doubt.'

'Not about anything,' said Joe.

'Not about him.'

'He refused to meet me before.' said Joe.

'Really.'

'I wish you wouldn't make those English noises.'

'Sorry.'

'There you go again.'

'What's the matter ?' said Graham. 'You anxious about him or something ?'

'The old bull and the young bull,' said Joe.

'The old bull and the young bull ? Not Hemingway still. Or is it Frank Dalby Davison. ? *Man Shy ?'*

'There isn't room for both of us.'

Graham groaned. 'Oh dear, which do we have to kill ?'

'There you go again.'

'I don't see that it has to be like that,' Graham said.

'You don't see a lot of things,' said Joe, 'but that doesn't mean they're not true.'

'True ?' said Graham. 'I don't think I've ever heard you use that word before.'

They met in the Newcastle and from the beginning it was all wrong because Joe and Graham waited in the front bar on George Street and Perrot waited in the snug at the back. The five o'clock crowd had vanished by the time they discovered him.

Joe and Perrot faced up to each other, snuffling, pawing the sawdust floor. Graham waited on the periphery, assigned the role of cattle dog. He would have preferred to sit around on bar stools and have a literary conversation but they were country boys, Joe and Perrot. And so was Graham, but from another country. Here it was to be the stockyards. He tried.

'I reviewed your last collection,' he said. He was hoping Perrot would remember. It was a glowing review. He'd responded to the rich language, the moving accounts of innocence betrayed time and time again.

'I never read the reviews,' said Perrot.

'Not even in the quarterlies ?'

The longer ones, the serious ones.

'Especially not in the quarterlies.'

Wasted, all wasted. The time was yet to come when Graham stopped reading the reviews. But it would.

The dark, oppressive snug. Joe and Perrot returned to each other after the interruption. A girl appeared and attached herself to the group. Joe and Perrot ignored her so she settled on Graham.

'It's a literary meeting,' he said, 'an historical occasion.'

'Oh good,' she said, 'I'll stay.'

Like an English pub, the wooden panelling rather than hosed-down tiles, low ceilings, the smell of urine from the gents.

'Why did you get Leonie to introduce your selected stories ?' Graham asked.

Trying again. Pursuing literary connexions, the gossip beneath the text.

Perrot looked at him, those boiled eyes above the bristly moustache.

'She holds her drink like a man,' he said.

'Really,' said Graham. He filed it away as an interesting phrase. 'But why get her to write the introduction ?'

Perrot looked at him, those boiled eyes above the bristly moustache.

'She holds her drink like a man.'

And then back to the stockyard.

He made one last attempt. Perhaps he made more, but only one survived in the willing memory.

'What would you like to drink ?'

Darkness had totally fallen, time was coming up.

'Whatever you can afford, dear boy, whatever you can afford.'

'I can afford whatever you want,' Graham said.

'Then buy it, dear boy, don't talk about it.'

'Beer, Scotch, gin ?'

'Scotch, of course, dear boy, whatever you can afford.'

Graham took out all his change, heaped it on the bar.

'As much Scotch as that will buy,' he said to the barman.

It bought a ponyful of scotch. Perrot drank it down.

They went off to dinner, Graham driving the old Humber, Joe directing, Perrot in the back with the girl.

This was when Joe had discovered American fast food. Kentucky Fried Chicken. He insisted they bought Kentucky Fried Chicken from the new Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in the Cross. They took it back to Balmain.

'Whatever you say, dear boy.'

They sat in the little cabin in the pines, eating out of cardboard boxes with the Kentucky Fried Colonel's face and Perrot's face merging indistinguishably beneath their whiskers. No doubt someone remarked on that, no doubt Graham, as Perrot and the girl perched on the bed, Graham sat on the rickety chair from the kitchen, Joe on the vinyl and chrome executive chair from his office, Joe staggering up to pour bourbons.

No dialogue survives.

Joe went off for something and never came back.

'I did,' he said. 'Or you could say I never went away. I crawled underneath the house to listen to what you were saying about me. It was most interesting. You can crawl underneath the floor and hear everything.'

It was a wood and fibro cottage perched on a foundation of brick footings, with a dusty cobwebby space beneath to let through air and Joe.

'What did we say ?' Graham asked, not unanxious, he might have said anything, he might have said many a specific thing.

'It was most interesting. One day you might read about it. Then I went home to Rachel covered in dust and cobwebs. She thought I was risen from the grave.'

Graham too made his exit, went out to the garden for a piss and decided it best not to return, drove home.

The morning light over the harbour flooded in. No cobwebs. Just the clear reflected horror of it all. What if they'd killed him, what if they found him dead from ponies of whisky and middies of bourbon ? What if he was lying there not knowing where he was, how would he know where he was ?

He got up, showered, struggled out into the bright light. As he drove down Darling Street sick on the stomach, just before the turn by the bowling club, he saw Perrot and the girl emerge from the lane and look at the morning traffic. Perrot's peremptory cab hailing manner.

Graham turned off the road into whatever alley was available. It was the soap works. He backed out cautiously, went back home. He could see them in the rear view mirror, waiting at the bus stop.

'I came back too,' said Joe. 'Rachel made me. I came past on my morning run. I crawled underneath the house again. I heard them making breakfast. I couldn't bear to hear what they said, so I left.'

'It's a wonder we didn't see each other,' said Graham.

'It always is,' said Joe.

9. AMERICAN POETS IN LONDON

The American poets were unlike anything he had encountered before. They talked continuously, endlessly, generating oceans, atmospheres, continents of words. It was a flow that poured all round and over them, they bathed in a winding swirl of consonants and vowels. Everything was there for explanation, commentary, anecdote, association. He sat towards the back of the raked lecture theatre and felt the sea rise to his feet, steadily immersing him. It was their assertion of being, their insistence of presence to the vast indifference. To be a poet, they explained, you have to write poems and publish them. You find other poets, people you know writing poems, you put your poems together with theirs, type them onto stencils, and you have a magazine, find out other poets whose work you admire, ask them to send poems to your magazine, find out other poets who are editors and you ask them for poems and they ask you, you assemble a network through the mails, sending out these sheafs of poems, little magazines produced on institutional equipment, duplicators, off-set presses, photocopiers, mailed out at institutional expense to poets at other institutions, a list of publications begins to emerge, the core of a curriculum vitae, poems, poems in magazines, poems gathered in slim samplings, booklets, books, you have sewn yourself into the professional world of poetry, you have the credibility to teach poetry institutionally, you get hired, the first struggle is over, after that conferences, international travel.

There, in the centre of authority, the heart of convention, London, they ignored authority and convention. Create your own, was their message, just do it. In a society that operated by accreditation, admission and exclusion, the right imprint or nothing at all, they recommended self-publishing. In that traditional world of English amateurism there should have been no need for the message; but the home of professed amateurism preserved its literary professionalism tightly, penetrable only through the recognized codes. While America, the land of the commercial, the professional, spawned this world of self-creation, self-assertion, this structure of the unstructured, this possibility of access. It was all very simple; a matter of address lists and the lowest cost technology of reproduction available.

It wasn't especially different from what they had already been doing, but they had never gone about it in such an organized way, never seen it as an operation, a plan of campaign. There had been readings, there had been duplicated poetry magazines, there had been poster poems: the forms had all been imitated: but the purpose behind those forms had never properly been understood. The career drive, the strategy, the intention had been missed in a concern to replicate a surface which they had put to no use. But hearing these poets talk, now he could see how the eccentric

hobbyist might be conscripted to the grand design. Play could become professional. Out of absence and exclusion they could motivate a new publishing programme, a programme that was a new poetic, a new promotion.

Out of the sea emerged familiar faces. The mists congealed into poetic forms. Valda, resplendent with pierced nose and brazen nose stud.

'There you are. I thought I'd see someone here. I might have guessed. How've you been ? You haven't got that dreadful woman with you have you, not that creature?'

'I'm alone,' he said. 'How about you ?'

The question he'd always asked yet rarely dared to vocalize.

'Oh, the beast's sulking down in Surrey. He said he'd seen enough poets in Balmain to last him all his future incarnations. And let me tell you, that's going to be a lot of incarnations, has he got something to learn. Poets are the least of his problems.

'I thought you were in India. Someone said you'd got sick.'

'I am, I was,' she said. 'I still am, sick. So I came here to get well. What a joke. I reckon this whole place is sick, it's a society of sickness.'

He looked round at the gathering. 'What, here, these poets ?'

‘No, not them, they're not sick, you've got to be alive to get sick, they're just words words words, disincarnate entities, they're like a disease of the larynx, yeah, I guess they're sick too in a way but they're the sickness, word viruses, that's what they are. And they've come to the right place. If they killed off some of the words here they might do some good, everyone's suffocating in words here and they all mean No.'

'It is a bit like that,' he said.

'There you are,' she said, 'you've got it too. "It is a bit like that." You've become a blooming Englishman again, you know that ?'

She stood there, nose stud blazing, her hair golden, her eyes intense, and for a moment they were encapsulated in a glow, a bubble of golden communication, like naked figures by Bosch, their heads in a space capsule of might have been, nearly was, but never to be regained.

She laughed.

'Let's go and get a coffee and meet some people,' she said, hand on his arm, steering him out, away, the longed for touch dissolving the moment, moving him out by the mechanical coordination of bone and tendon, nerves and will.

They ended up in a bar for lunch, a pub, why call it a bar, had the American poets already so successfully imposed their idiom, holding forth there, the others listening, buying drinks, making assignations. Poetry meant freedom and freedom meant sex and booze and dope and pills, it was an inner world projected there in the smoky wooden panelled English pub, compressed globules of freedom beaded on the edge of some Fitzroy street, intense inner expression that let the world go by, that surrendered the resistant world.

'What are you doing here ?' Valda asked.

'I'm on leave and I saw this was on.'

'Just something to do.'

'Just something to do.'

'What are you doing after ?'

'I was going to visit a friend,' he said. 'Why don't you come. Meet an English poet.'

'All right,' she said. 'Where is he ?'

'It's about five or six hours north by train,' he said. 'We could go up as soon as the conference ends.'

But she didn't want to go so far. Maybe. But what a hassle.

'You'll see something else of England,' he said. 'London's not England.'

'I don't want to be in England,' she said. 'I want to be in India. The only reason I'm here is I got sick.'

'Well while you're here you might as well see some of the country.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'What're you doing now, that's what I meant. Where're you staying?'

'With someone I know.'

'Some stupid chick, I suppose.'

'A friend.'

'Well, piss her off. Let's get a hotel. You can afford it. You've got lots of money. Let's get a hotel for heaven's sake.'

'I've already arranged somewhere to stay,' he said. 'I can't change it now.'

'Where is she then ?'

'She's working.'

'Leave a message saying you got sick. You had to leave. Go on, you've got time now, before they start off again for the afternoon. Then you can get a hotel.'

'I can't,' he said. 'I've already arranged to stay there. We can go off to Jon's after the conference. Bring something up for him to publish in his magazine.'

'Publish ?' she said, 'why should I care about that ? You're like all the rest of them, all you care about is getting published, that's all they ever talk about, then never talk about what they're writing. And as for living, they don't even know what that is.'

If there were any English writers there, Graham did not recognize them. There must have been some, surely. It was the Australians he knew and ended up with, however. It was a mark of how far he was expatriated, now he had become a visiting colonial. It was an improvement on being a visiting provincial proletarian. And it was more lively, more seemed to be happening with the Australians. And they could respond to the Americans with an innocent openness, here were other pioneers struggling against a backward Europe, here were fellow forgers of new idioms. But the Americans vanished with the unrecognized English. So they presumed, the Australians. They vanished, anyway, which left the Australians gathered in ever optimistic conviviality, dragging tables together in an Indian restaurant, ordering beers and lagers as if they were a visiting football team, involving other tables in a scrutiny of Valda's nose stud, which diverted her from hassling Graham to get rid of that creature, what shocking taste you have in women, let's just go and get a hotel somewhere, then I'll see if I'm coming up north with you, I can't think about it now, not in this place, not with that creature sitting there.

Graham took the train up north and read the American poets while young men roamed the corridors drinking cans of Newcastle brown. The sky seemed higher in the north, the air sharper, rarer, finer. And a brief flash of Sydney in the prototype harbour bridge crossing the Tyne.

Jon had him selling the magazine. They drove out to the halls of residence of a university and he assigned his wife and Graham each a building, knock on every door. 'Excuse me, I'm selling a literary magazine, there's a special student price and a special student subscription rate and we rely on your support to keep literature thriving and this has been thriving for fifteen years now and some of the major...' And sometimes they listened and sometimes, and reassuringly often enough to provide sufficient positive reinforcement to continue, they would buy a copy. Sad, red-eyed, lonely, lost students drinking instant coffee through the long Saturday afternoons, not out there playing sport, not roaming through the city, not ensconced in love making, but gazing through the window at the gray expanse of the overcast day, the light eternally, perceptibly, but oh so gradually fading, rare strains of jazz, broken phrases, sad cadences down the stairwells.

'I hate it,' said Lorna. 'It's hell. I swear he does it to torture me. It's a test and he knows I always fail tests. That's why he keeps putting me through them. Four

times a year we do this and every time I think, pray this time he'll forget, or this time he'll say we've got enough subscriptions not to have to sell it this way, or he'll hire someone. But no. Four times a year my heart sinks, my tongue cleaves to my palate, I hyperventilate, but it's no good, he bundles me out into that wretched little van and off we go, the raggle-taggle gypsies, come buy my wares.'

'We'll just have a snack, I think,' said Jon, 'then we can eat after.'

'After what ?' said Lorna.

'After the play.'

'After the play ? We'll be starving. What play, anyway ? You didn't say we were going to a play. Are we going to a play ?'

'Well, not exactly,' Jon said

'Not exactly, he says.'

'More, to the playhouse.'

'Yes, Jon.'

'I thought we might sell some copies in the foyer as people are going in. And possibly...'

'We might what ?'

'... possibly in the interval too. I've talked to the manager. He has no objection.'

'The manager isn't selling them,' said Lorna.

Out into the van, Lorna crouched in the back on the metal floor.

'I like it like this,' she said. 'It's bliss. It reminds me of bliss and takes my mind off the hell to come.'

'Which hell is that ?' asked Jon.

'The hell of selling magazines.'

'Ah, now,' he said, 'the hell to come is the hell if you don't sell magazines.'

'You're ponderous,' she said.

He was irrepressible. He bundled them out, marched them in, pushed them into the crowd.

Sell, sell, sell.

Graham stopped to talk to Lorna after a while.

'Is this allowed ?' she said.

'Jon's talking to someone,' he said.

'Jon does. Whenever you look up from selling you see him talking. It's his way of avoiding selling. He can't admit how terrible it is. So he engages people in these vast conversations to avoid the terror. They buy the magazine to get away. Personally I find it too hard a price to pay, having to talk as well as well. I'd give a special discount for those who said nothing. Sign language welcome here.'

They went for a drink until the interval, round the corner to an old dark pub with a coal fire.

'Somebody saw him once,' Lorna said, 'selling along the line of a theatre queue in Hampstead. Coming the other way there was a busker with a violin.'

'A saxophone, actually,' said Jon.

'With a musical instrument. And gradually they closed up on each other. And when they met Jon was seen to be selling the busker the magazine.'

'I gave him a discount,' Jon said. 'As a fellow creative worker.'

'You're the soul of generosity,' said Lorna.

'We didn't know whether to make up one bed or two,' Jon said.

They were in the kitchen, late afternoon, the fading light, the gray creeping out of the stones, seeping into the atmosphere.

'It didn't matter either way, really,' Graham said.

'I didn't know quite what your relationship was with Valda.'

'Me neither,' he said. 'I never did.'

'Why didn't she come ?'

'She got huffy about the person I was staying with in London.'

Jon took a large saucepan and cutting board off the shelf.

'Don't you think it's about time you settled down ?'

Dumbfounded, that's what Graham was, dumbfounded.

'I know I'm hardly one to talk,' said Jon, but never one not to talk. 'But I am older than you and I have the benefit of learning from my mistakes.'

'I suppose I should,' said Graham, 'some time.'

He'd not really thought about it. Settling down was for some fulfilled stage, when he'd actually achieved something to settled down into. Arnold Bennett's yacht. Walter's Scott's mansion. There wasn't much to settle down into at the moment. To think about it would be to wonder if there ever would be.

'This is how you make a curry,' said Jon. 'You heat up the oil, chop up onions, tomato, garlic, chillies.'

The Englishman's recourse against starvation and desertion by womankind, the hot curry, the hotter you could eat it the more the lone Englishman you were, sweating at the pores but pressing on regardless, the rogue elephant with a bullet in the brain that refuses to stop its charge.

'What I'd like to do, ' said Graham, 'is start publishing. I'd like to start a press. The trouble with a magazine is it goes out of date straight away. Books can stay on the shelves.'

'They certainly do,' said Jon.

'How does your poetry publishing go ?'

'Well, it doesn't make money. That's why we haven't done much.'

'Oh,' said Graham.

They went to a reading in the old Institute building, panelled, splendid in a dull, pompous way, another world from the stories of working class life that one of the great working class writers was reading. Sid Chaplin. But the stories didn't excite Graham the way the American poets had. It was what he felt he should believe in, it was where the values he espoused were surely to be found. But it was not his dialect, not his region, not his life. The idioms of the Americans were the siren lure, that was the song of itself that tugged.

Always tugged, pegged between dour duty and the relaxed play of language. Somewhere in between, sustained at the intersection of forces, couldn't he balance, weave a fabric that integrated it all? But you had to start at one point and sling a line across. You could not begin suspended in the middle. It was something you could only reach. There were so many ways of not reaching it. So many lures, so many seductions, so many more excuses.

'That was Basil Bunting down the front,' Jon said. The poet hailed by Pound and Zukofsky and forgotten by his countrymen, as securely in exile as if he'd never left Iran, as if he'd never returned to Britain.

'He worked for years as a proof reader at nights. In the end he went blind,' said Jon.

They drove through narrow lanes in the green countryside.

'This was the site of an old railway line,' said Jon, and they trekked along it; old railway lines, old pit heads, the workers long since dead. Jon opened himself to the atmosphere, the black cries of suffering. He would not let them be forgotten. He hewed out the past in all its recalcitrance. Not for him the siren songs of the poem about itself.

'Don't you think,' Jon said, or was this when Graham visited him some years later, 'don't you think that because we were in a sense from outside the system, I know we've talked about this before and you said, quite rightly, we had an argument, I remember, and you said that for me to call myself working class was not the same as being born into the working class, and I accept that point, but I did leave school when I was fifteen and I've had to support myself ever since, but the point I'm making is

that we both felt outside that middle class culture, so in a sense we both had to learn it and dominate it before we could be confident enough to dispense with it. Whereas to other writers that aesthetic is something that comes naturally, they're born into it. We can see now that it is decaying, but at the time, well no, probably at the time we could see it was doomed but that it was still in place and it still set up the rules of the game. I don't think either of us felt confident enough to disregard it altogether. Yet in one sense we did, we chose to separate ourselves from that culture, you even more radically than me, by leaving the country. But by living here, up here as they put it, is to be almost as far away. It certainly feels like that. So we were both distancing ourselves from the culture at the same time as trying to learn its terms, its codes. But knowing that we had to chose what we wanted to preserve of it and not be dominated by it. I think we both sensed that if we'd stayed in London, well, stayed for me since I was born there, but settled in London, if you had settled there, we would have been swamped, we wouldn't have been strong enough to resist the destructive features, that mixture of threat and bribe, that smiling villainy of the literary establishment. You would have to be very strong to resist that to produce good work. I think we're both strong. But I think we both realized that we needed our strength for our work and that was the priority in the decisions we took. Looking back you can see there were probably other ways we could have done things, better ways I'm sure. But we do need to remember why we did what we did, even if we weren't fully aware at the time. Otherwise you can get the sense that you're drifting and when you've forgotten how and why you got where you are you can be sure everyone else has forgotten about you altogether. I used to look through the literary pages and count how many times my name appeared, I don't think I'm unduly egotistical, but what else have you got to know you exist except that external record ? It's madness, I know that, you know that. But without that assurance that you impinge on the outside world, it's very hard to keep producing, to believe in what you're doing, even to keep on doing it. When you think you're being ignored, when you cease to exist in that world, you start to feel you don't exist at all.'

He phoned his parents and they met him at the station. The open happiness in his father's face at his return shook him. So many years locked in embattled stances, he had denied that family love they all found it so hard to express. He felt remorse, guilt, at having spent so much time away when he could have, should have, been with them. And now there were only a few days left. He was truly back in the Midlands, the golden evenings, the burden of guilt and remorse, the inexpressibility of emotion, of love, of affection, the locked-in, tangled, contradictory codes, the frustrated impulses,

the swallows catching the evening gnats, the thrush singing on the roof top, plangency.

10. PUBLISH AND PERISH

She came up to him at the performance space. Graham was there reading. There were readings and performances and he wasn't sure about the performances. Just as the anti-war marches developed that aura of school games, the prefects herding you along, instructing you when to yell, now these concerts of the avant-garde had developed the smell of charades, of the revenge of the artistic prefects on the sporting prefects. But still prefects. And as with every social revenge, some had made accommodation with the new managers and turned up to perform still in their football socks and jerseys. It was a mark of the refusal of art elitism, perhaps; but as far as Graham could decipher, football socks and dinner jackets, gyms and theatres, were all part of the same elitism.

But he read there. He read pretty well anywhere. That was what you did if you wanted to be heard and had no other strategies. You could be inserted from above, the hand reaching into the model theatre, putting you there, on the boards, the right connections on other boards. Or you could battle in from outside, machete in hand, cutting a swathe through the jungle. He preferred to give readings than cut a swathe through the jungle or work out in the gym.

So there he was, in this bare room. If they had been in New York it would have been called a loft. They weren't in New York but it was still presented on the principle of the loft. Big, bare, open room, was there anything on the wall, visual icons, masterpieces bursting into efflorescence, it wasn't only a mark of the iconoclast's disregard of the visual that he couldn't remember. There probably wasn't anything hung there. These people had gone beyond representation, beyond commodities. Now it was living art, living sculpture, the body, now they didn't reify the impulse and frame it and hang it, now they enacted it, posturing at the end of the room there, a tape-recorder providing the music back-up, kitsch, some popular song of the past played now for camp, for superiority to the corn, the crass, but the crass was what kept the attention, had rhythm, dynamic.

With this going on, and lots of drink, she came up to him and said 'Hi' and started talking.

'You're not watching this, are you ?' she said.

'Not really.'

'I'm waiting for Ruth's number, you know Ruth.'

They talked about Ruth and if there were any art objects on the walls maybe they talked about them too, or there again maybe they just went down to the trestle table at one end of the room where the drinks were and drank some more. The poets

came up and said where was the party ? Maybe the performance people had a party but the poets didn't know about it. Maybe the performance people just went home to bed. But the poets wanted to party on.

They settled on Graham's place, Sometimes if was an honour if everyone came round for a party, sometimes it was an unwelcome intrusion, an invasion.

'Want to come to a party ?' Graham asked her.

'Sure,' she said.

'Did you rent this car ?' she said.

'No,' he said, 'why ?'

'It smells like a rental car.' She reached along the dashboard. 'Where's the radio ?'

'There isn't one.'

'What ? Whoever heard of a rental car without a radio.'

'It isn't a rental car,' he said.

'I guess not, not without a radio. Did you steal it or something ?'

'No, I bought it.'

'What, without a radio ?'

'I don't listen to radio,' he said.

'Who does ?' she said, 'except when you're driving. That's why people have car radios, so they can listen to radio when they're driving.'

She looked around. 'What else doesn't it have ?'

'I don't know. What else would you like it not to have ?'

'A phone,' she said, 'what about a phone ?'

'No phone.'

'What's this ? A cigarette lighter. The last of the big spenders. What about a joint ?'

'Sure, if you've got one,' he said.

'"Sure, if you've got one." What sort of answer's that ? How cheap can you get?'

She opened her bag and took out a little tin box with some ancient cough lozenge label on it. Inside were two or three joints, ready rolled. She took one out.

'At least the lighter works,' she said. 'Maybe you should take it back and get it taken out.'

They stopped near his house and smoked a second one before they went in.

'No point in wasting it on the mob,' she said.

They watched the poets arrive and climb into the house through a side window.

'Maybe we should go in.'

'We'll see them if they try to steal the television,' she said. 'Or don't you have one ?'

The party was in full swing by the time they went in, insofar as a handful of poets makes a party in full swing. The front door was open wide, the lights were on, and the record player was playing sad songs of Leonard Cohen. The poets liked Leonard Cohen. They saw him as one of them. They sat round drinking wine from mugs. The flagon was in the middle of the floor. But the poets themselves were at Graham's typewriter, typing out a collective poem at his table. When they came up with a good line they gave out yells of acclaim.'

'Yeah, good one.'

'Is this supposed to be a party ?' she said, looking at them from the doorway.

'As my old tutor was reputed to have said when some girl knocked on his door and said "I thought there was a party here," "Come in, my dear, you are the party."'

'Oh yeah.'

'Well, that's the story.'

'What's in this door ?' she said, turning away from the poets, opening it.

'I'll show you,' he said, following her in, closing the door behind them.

'Oh, I get it,' she said.

He put his arms round her and they started to grope and kiss, his hands on her back, her buttocks, her breasts.

'What about a drink ?' she said.

'I'll get one,' he said and went out to the poets, shutting the door behind him. He found a couple of glasses in the kitchen and filled them at the flagon.

'Hey,' said Sam, 'thought you were never coming, I had to climb in to let them in.'

'Really ?'

'Yeah, no bullshit, I had to climb over the roof and through that back door. I nearly killed myself. I slipped. See. Look at these bruises.'

'I don't want to look at bruises.'

'That's why you'll never be a poet. You ought to look at them, I got them for you. They were all going to go away if I hadn't climbed in. What took you so long ?'

'Hey, Sam, check this,' the poets called, tapping away.

Graham left them, went into the bedroom. She was already in bed. He gave her the glass and got undressed and joined her. They drank a bit and fucked. He

remembered lying there, she had her back to him and he held his hands round her breasts. It was all he could remember.

'I gotta go,' she said in the morning and left before he could think of a way of finding out her name without asking directly and revealing he didn't know it.

She'd told him she was sharing a house with Ruth and without too much difficulty he was able to find the address. He went round there. Not without trepidation. He had never been sure of this sort of situation, whether he would be welcome, whether he would even be remembered. If he couldn't remember a name, why should she remember one either, or even a face, or even an incident ? If she hadn't said her name and hadn't said come round did that mean she didn't want to see him. After all, she knew where he lived, she'd been there. Maybe she never wanted to see him again. All this liberation, all this inhibition. He braced himself for the look of blank incomprehension. Or the contemptuous mirth: what brought you along ?

Ruth answered the door. It made it easier in one way but it left him with a lot more explaining to do and he still had to elicit the name.

'Hello,' she said, 'I thought you might be showing up some time.'

'Did you ?'

'Sure did.'

'And why was that ?'

'A little bird whispered to me.'

'Oh yes.'

'Do you want to come in ?'

'Well yes.' He guessed he did. He didn't especially want to stand out on the street. But what he really wanted was to see the unknown one, the unnamed. And if he got in there and she wasn't there, then he had to hang around before he could find a way to get out again.

'I hear you've been raging on.'

He agreed, following her in. There didn't seem to be anybody else there.

'Want a coffee ?' she said. 'Or wine ?.

'Not wine.'

'Too much at the performance ?'

'Enough, anyway.'

She went into the kitchen and began making coffee. He joined her. There was no one else in the kitchen, either.

'So what've you been up to ?'

'Oh, this and that.'

'Apart from that.'

'Apart from that ?' he said. 'Not a lot.'

'Writing anything ?'

'A bit.'

'That's nice,' she said.

She was making him sweat, he was sure of that. Or half sure. As sure as he was of anything. That was how it seemed. Unless she thought he'd come round to visit her. But he didn't think that was it. She seemed to know about the other night. If only he had a name to go on, ask, how's so-and-so, what's-her-name ? Normally the name would have cropped up, part of an ordinary conversation. It was as if she knew he didn't know and was playing him along, waiting to see how long before he admitted he didn't know. And the longer this went on, the harder it was to ask, 'Your flatmate, what's her name ?' Or something like that. How else could he put it ?

They went back out of the kitchen with the coffee. He thought of looking in the fridge in case they'd labelled their cartons of milk with their names, the unco-operative household. He looked round the living room for clues, names written on books, maybe. He picked up one or two, looked at the fly-leaves, all blank, no names. The day of the bookplate was passed.

'Your friend,' he finally said.

'Yes.' she said. Anyone else would have given the name then, wouldn't they, but she didn't.

'Your flat mate,' he said.

'Yes.'

These yesses that blocked access more firmly than the firmest no.

'Did you want to see her ?'

'Well, yes.'

'She's out at the moment.'

'Ah. Do you know when she's coming back ?'

'Any time,' she said. She looked at her watch. 'It could be any time now. But there again, it could be ages.'

'That makes it hard to know what to do,' he said.

'It does, doesn't it.'

Just the noise of traffic in the street.

'Do you want to leave a note ?' she said. 'Or you can just hang on, if you like.'

'The trouble is,' he said, there was no way round it, he had to explain, ruffling the back of his hair there, 'I don't seem to be able to remember her name.'

She laughed. 'Didn't she tell you ?'

'I'm not sure if she did or if I forgot it,' he said, thinking about it, seizing any offered aid, cautiously.

'She's like that,' she said, 'she often doesn't.'

She let him sit there, letting all that sink in, still not offering what he wanted.

There was the sound of a key in the lock.

'That's probably her now.'

They talked but not about very much. Just words across a kitchen table, music on the record player, coffee, beer. They went down to the pub, the London was where people were alleged to drink now, in Darling Street, but it was desolate, empty. The four or five lone drinkers. None of the energy of years ago, none of the happy, lazy enthusiasm. Whatever scene there had been, and there had been, she'd never been there for it but it had existed, faded now. They went on to a Lebanese restaurant in Cleveland Street, parachute fabric lining the roof, where Graham remembered the conversations after the pub, long dialogues over the felafel and hummus and baba ghannouj and laham bagine. And again it was empty, desolate, but at least they got a table. And got some wine at the corner pub and sat there talking, talking of past exciting events that so unavoidably were no longer, they would have to create new ones.

She'd been in the underground press. It was like saying you belonged to a cadre of initiates. Not formalised. Not quite like saying you belonged to the Peace Corps. But an alternative organization. And whatever fractured, filamented, marginal or peripheral part you might have had in that, or what glancing moments of acquaintance with the mighty, or even what central role, was never clear. The underground press was like that. It rejected those old traditional hierarchies and status roles. The trick was to learn the unstated status rules of the new system. Graham was never sure he was any good at that sort of thing. But in her he saw an adept, both teacher and pupil, a source and an agent. The gaps in their knowledge were now supplemented by each other's information horde. With what the two of them knew they could assemble a pretty persuasive range of information. Expertise, who knew, who knew till you used it.

'I've always wanted to start a publishing company,' she said. She'd worked on underground papers, typeset, laid out, pasted up, she knew the technology. Graham knew the writing. There were good books around that no one was publishing. He could think of half a dozen people straight away who had manuscripts, novels, stories. They should keep away from poems. No hope of making a fortune in poems. Leonard Cohen, well yes. Yevtushenko, well yes. But once you weaken and do one, the

floodgates are open, the poets besiege you day and night, read you poems for breakfast, drop manuscripts off for you to read, come back to get a poem back, change their mind, cross out dedications, get stoned, get you stoned, waste the day, waste another day, no, no poets, poets are the pits. She didn't need to be persuaded about poetry. It wasn't in her range of interest. But her range of interest was open. Comic books, dope books, there was a big market there. For a moment an empire blossomed before them.

But she was going away, maybe for ever. It gave everything the freedom of the undefined, no fear of the unravellings of involvement, because in a few weeks' time she would be in Europe, her toes in the salty water of the Mediterranean, catching ferries between the islands, the jingle of goat bells on the brown hills, the while basilicas, the olive groves, retsina, but she didn't especially like the taste of retsina, she didn't especially like the taste of fish, 'Does it taste fishy ?' she asked the waiter in a fish restaurant they went to, she was wary of the remoter outreaches of food.

One night before she left they had dinner with Joe and Rachel. Joe had just seen his family: father, mother, brothers. He was ashen. They reduced him to the age of six again.

'Most things do,' said Rachel.

Joe ignored her. He ignored Bobbie too. He was annoyed that Bobbie was there. He had phoned Graham to meet him for dinner and a change in the expected arrangement annoyed him. He wanted his own familiars now, to wipe out the experience of the family. Bobbie couldn't see what the fuss was about. If you had a family like that you just kept away from them as much as possible. 'Just borrow the car and get away, that's what I do.'

'My father still won't let me drive his car. He gives the keys to my brother, but not to me.'

She couldn't appreciate the bourgeois tragedy of it. To Joe it had all the dimensions of Tennessee Williams. To Bobbie he was carrying on like Jerry Lewis, he was just weird. She was unimpressed. Joe too, he was unimpressed with Bobbie. They were at the Greeks and it was late and Bobbie didn't like anything on the menu and ordered casserole in the end and then said it tasted funny and wouldn't eat it. She could have been right. But for Joe it was 'our restaurant,' this was where he'd come for years and seen the *Bulletin* editors in the window seats, columnists ballooning there, it was part of the mythology he was assembling about him of the achieved life, against the denigrations of his family. They might not believe in his writing but this

was the world of writing materialized, this was a restaurant with its tradition of a literary world, never mind that it was an offshoot of a restaurant that had once been sited elsewhere, no matter that the *Bulletin* had a continuity only in name with the literary vanguard of the 1890s, it was a continuity, the best he could come up with.

And you never said the food was bad, not if you were a visitor privileged to enter this sanctuary of dreams, Joe's dreams, but it penetrated Graham's dreams too. You entered through a lift, a bare anonymous lift on the ground floor that took you up to the restaurant, opening out from this narrow metal cylinder into a wide, spacious, wooden furnished room looking over Hyde Park. And this constriction and expansion, this lift journey would often be there in dreams, opening into some subtly different restaurant, with some other rooms, some further secret recesses, or some delay before reaching the real room and the window seats overlooking the park.

But that was all unknown to Bobbie. It was just a bad meal in a dull old place.

She sent him a magazine back from England with a photograph of her naked on the cover together with a few other people. This was the underground press and there she was, occasionally she'd send a letter back written on one of the new pieces of equipment she was trying out: once it came double, two columns of the same letter, one column ragged right, the other column justified.

And after that she was back in America and that was a year of cheap airflights and he wrote to her about coming over to visit, it not being clear whether she would stay there or not, depended on how things worked out, and he wanted to follow this guide to the underground in the home of the underground, to see where it all led. This might be the way of the future, how could you know till you explored it, this might be fun, anyway, and different.

Joe and Rachel were going to be in the States at the same time.

'Tell me where you're staying and we can meet up,' said Joe.

But Graham wasn't sure he wanted that. Bobbie offered a new world.

'Of course he'd want to know where you'll be,' said Valda, 'of course he expects you to tell him, that's what he's like.' She was scornful. 'Don't flipping tell him, I wouldn't.'

But he couldn't leave it at that, so easy, just not telling him. He wrote Joe a letter explaining his position. It had got to this, positions. This provided the focus, defending positions. But he didn't want to meet up in Los Angeles. He wanted to be in Los Angeles to experience Los Angeles, not replicate Balmain, which he didn't even enjoy that much any more in Balmain. 'I know you like this sort of thing,' he wrote to Joe, 'meeting up for Christmas in Dublin, etc., but when I go away I like to

go away. And what I want to experience are the things you in fact reject.' Music, drugs. They both felt this deprivation in their childhood, the absence of visual art, the absence of music. 'But I don't want to stay that way,' he wrote. And moreover, and it wasn't clear how this moreover was part of it, but this was the occasion, this was the accumulation that had formulated into a position, 'and moreover I don't feel that the double act we have created, always linked in reviewers' phrases, is really helping me, it may look like a double act but if we're going to have that let's reciprocally help each other, for instance, I reviewed your first book, what about you reviewing one of mine, I don't feel that you're actually helping me, indeed I feel I'm losing in this purported alliance, two parts of a pantomime horse as we've been called, and which part am I ?'

Was it true ? Did he feel that ? Did the pen just take him along, the deep resistance to beginning and then the foolhardy flow. Maybe it was his awareness of his own competitivenesses and envies that alerted him to what must have been Joes'. What he felt was, Joe would dampen the LA. experience, would be critical, distanced. What Graham wanted was an exposure to something new, something different, energy, excitement, he wanted to surge ahead and he felt he'd been held back.

On the plane his seat was next to an American who worked at the secret American installation at Pine Gap. He told Graham the oil crisis was a big fraud, the tankers were lined up outside the ports waiting to unload. He communicated this satellite's eye view of them spread out at anchor, the sun glistening along the top of the water.

He also told him Australia had made a big mistake using the British television standard of 625 lines. Why had the two most advanced nations, the USA and Japan, used 400 lines ? It was cheaper. It meant more people could afford TV sets. Democratic. Good for business.

Bobbie met him at the airport. He had been afraid that she mightn't have, that he'd be there at LA. International and the hotel buses streaming by and the downtown and regional buses and the cabs and he'd be standing there without an idea of what to do. But she was there.

They were awkward with each other. An angular embrace. They went to the baggage delivery. 'We're staying at this place,' she said, 'then we can figure out what you want to do, we can stay and then if you want we can go up to San Francisco, that might be good, or we could, anyway, see what you think, I didn't know what sort of plans you'd have, I didn't get a place cause it's such a hassle.'

It was best to be told the full horror initially, that they'd got nowhere to stay and he was here for a month, what he'd asked when he wrote was was it possible to rent a place, somewhere not too noisy, maybe he'd actually write something, the days were long and the ennui of an alien city he'd known before, how would he fill up the

time ? Was he asking too much ? She seemed to think so. 'Liz thought you sounded like Henry.'

'Who's Henry ?'

'Henry was the creep I used to live with.'

'Oh yes, Henry.'

'Liz figured you were coming across like Henry. I reassured her you weren't.'

She looked at him appraisingly. 'You're not, are you, you've not flipped or anything ?'

'I'm much the same as ever,' he said.

'That's good,' she said, 'I told her nobody's like Henry, that's one thing we can be grateful for.'

They stayed with Liz and Lou in an apartment in a two storey block somewhere amid streets and eucalypts and fire hydrants and freeways. It was painted some functional olive or gray and they occupied a small spare room. Lou painted and drew in the living room. He was working on a monster. He painted science-fiction visions. He used to do cartoons for the underground press. Visions of nuclear apocalypse, ecological pleas, the war in Vietnam. Up on the shelf were some Nazi regalia he was restoring or creating for a Nazi regalia collector.

The underground was in disarray. They met the man who used to edit the *Free Press*. 'We got carried away,' he said. 'We got this list of all the undercover cops, all the drug squad. So we ran it in the paper with photos. And the police association sued for invasion of privacy and lack of earnings and respect and you name it, and they got everything. I don't have anything now. I'm looking into a scheme to donate my property to the state, like my house, so I can live in it till I die. Otherwise I'm out on the street. But I don't know, they don't even want me to live anywhere, they'd rather I died straightaway, but I'm looking into it. But if I get any assets they just seize them. So I don't have any. I get by. I teach journalism at college. They're good kids. They've got a lot to learn. It's kind of fun teaching them.'

They drove up the coast, Bobbie turning through the dial for music on the radio, the bare, bald hills, the mules pumping oil at roadsides, in empty lots, on pumping platforms out at sea.

'Did these hills ever have trees ?'

'Not that I remember.'

'But before you remember, was it all wooded once ? And then they deforested it ? Or was it always bare like this ?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Those are trees, look.'

'They're eucalypts,' he said. 'They introduced them from Australia. But what I wondered was whether it used to have trees here originally and they chopped them all down, or whether it never had any.'

The coast was eroded, unsettled. The ocean plate pushed up against the land plate and forced up hills and mounds with their soil strata running at odd angles, rising aslant from the ground. The road ran along beside the ocean and once in a while there would be trailers and campervans parked and people standing on the rocks on the coast with fishing rods. And inland this blank uncommunicating land, arroyos and burros, the missionaries had worked their way up here along El Camino Real. Sometimes you could see whales blowing as they came along the coast. Sometimes there would be porpoises leaping. And pelicans cruising above the ridges of the waves.

'So you know what you're going to do yet ?' he asked. 'Are you going to stay here or what ?'

She chewed away at her chewing gum.

'I think I might go back,' she said. 'I don't know what I'd do here. I thought I might get a job here but I don't see any. Everybody seems as fucked up as when I left or if they're not they're boring. I don't want to spend my time selling guitars. Or running a restaurant. Or hanging out waiting for the big break, next time, or the time after, you know.'

They'd gone round meeting some of her old friends, waiting silent while they meditated, listening to picked up threads of gossip. It was hard to go back, to tune in again, when nothing had changed that much except hopes and expectations but in their changing everything had changed.

They drove along the freeways and planned publishing schemes. Not empires. Not castles in the sky above the dreamy Spanish missions. But they'd always done this dreaming, this for both of them was the fantasy life; the project, not even the grand project, just a project. This is what they'd escaped into as children, the radio programme in the head, with Bobbie of course television had already superseded radio, her dreams had gone direct into video, and in colour at that. But running your own television station even for Bobbie was a remote fantasy; at this stage. Books, though, all you had to do was typeset them and get them printed. She knew how to typeset, she knew how to paste up, she knew how to print.

'The books are there,' said Graham. 'It's all piled up, all this great writing and no one's publishing it. Valda, she's got a book; and Sam, he has one. We could get

those. And Rolof, he has one, we could get that, he asked me to write an introduction for it.'

'Is this stuff good ?'

'Yes, sure it's good.'

'It's not junk ?'

'No. There's no point publishing junk. You don't have to if you're small.'

'Unless you can make money from it,' she said.

'Sure. If you can.'

'What about you ?' she said. 'Why don't we publish something of yours ?'

'I guess we could.'

'"I guess we could." Aren't we being hoity toity.'

'I didn't mean it that way,' he said. 'I think probably it's best not to start off publishing something of mine.'

'See how it works out first, huh ?'

It was partly that. But there was also the sense that this was to be a real operation, it wasn't a concealed self-publishing enterprise, he didn't need that, he already had a publisher. And yet. And yet. He knew, didn't he, that it was all a delicate balance with a publisher, he knew the book he'd just written was going to be tricky. Weird, they'd find it. He could see, maybe, if things didn't work out, he was going to have difficulties with that. Years of hassling and dealing and submission and rejection until something maybe came off, and what if it didn't, the years rolling by like bare hills ?

'If you don't publish with your own press, why would anyone else ?' she asked.

He didn't have an answer to that.

They drove into Hearst's palace at San Simeon. Toured around this monument to plunder and publishing. It was gross. But it recalled *Citizen Kane* and all the awful warnings of Orson Welles' career. It was a bleak, bare stretch of coast. They parked down at the beach and rolled a joint and watched the sun set into the ocean, gulls, sandpipers, cormorants finally settling down for the night, the cold Humboldt current cutting along the coast.

Publish, publish. 'Can you just publish ?' people would ask, people he met, all sorts of people who'd never thought about it before but had assumed as they had come to assume about most things that you couldn't just do them. Like television. Like radio.

'Don't you need a licence ?'

'Just money.'

'Is that all ?'

It had its own effectiveness as an entry requirement, money. It introduced its own regulation, imposed its own controls. But sometimes contradictions within the system emerged, briefly. This was one of those times. The technology was momentarily available, minimal technology, the composer as portable as a typewriter and as simple to operate. Almost. It took Graham a while to master it and he was never as good as Bobbie.

It was a brief period between the old commercial linotype and monotype setting and the new computer based word processing, film-setting, disc-setting, a brief moment in which a specialized technology was simple and cheap. In the end, which wasn't long after the beginning, the composers were discontinued and no replacements marketed. And then you needed more money, more money for more expensive equipment or more money to job out the setting and the controls were back in place. They would break down too as computers became widespread and cheaper, but that was later again.

Bobbie had learned to use a composer on various underground enterprises. Claiming to be skilled she taught herself on the job and rewrote the copy as she set it.

'You can't do this,' Graham said.

'Do what ?' she asked.

'Rewrite bits.'

'They were terrible. They didn't make sense.'

'It doesn't matter. This is literature, you can't rewrite it.'

'It doesn't have to make sense ?'

'It makes a different sort of sense.'

'Is that so ?'

'That's what we say.'

'I always used to rewrite on the *Free Press.* No one ever complained.'

'They probably never noticed. But these people will.'

'Maniacs,' said Bobbie. 'The ravings of maniacs.'

He didn't disagree. A maniacal commitment to the right word in the right place if not to the death at least to long and tedious havoc, vituperative correspondence, direct action, personal encounter, that was the nature of writing.

'Did you edit this stuff ? I thought you were supposed to be an editor.'

'The secret of good editing is to make the minimum of changes.'

'Is that so ?'

'I think so. All the straight publishers fiddle around and have to leave their thumbprint on everything. The editors edit to give themselves a job. They intervene

and intrude so people will think they're necessary. And they get it all wrong. They change things because they don't understand what's going on.'

'Is that so ?'

'In my experience.'

'And you do understand ?'

'You've got to trust the writers.'

'Do you ?'

'Not as people. necessarily. Not as human beings. But as writers, yes. You've got to believe they know what they're doing, otherwise what are you doing publishing them?'

'You tell me,' said Bobbie.

Bobbie had a friend who had a small typesetting business doing copy for advertisements and brochures. Bobbie sometimes worked for her and now in the evenings she went in to use the equipment to typeset the first books. It was high up in an old warehouse building in Chinatown, shades of Hammet mysteries, opium dens, slow lifts, cold creaking passageways. They would work up there into the early morning, the sound of city traffic, sirens, car horns, the general undifferentiated hum of urban activity murmuring around them. Bobbie used to bring in her portable television.

'How can you watch while you're typesetting ?'

'Easy,' she said. 'You don't watch it all the time, anyway. You watch the interesting bits and skip the adverts and the rest of it you listen to.'

Graham would proof the sheets she typeset and strip in corrections. The corrections were typed out line by line and then cut out with a sharp knife on a cutting board and pasted across the incorrect line. He learned to look for new errors in the corrections. It was one of the first paradoxes, the beginnings of joy in the dialectics of production. Correction generating error, unless closely watched. The negation of error did not necessarily mean the production of truth. There were always other errors, an infinite sea of regression. Slowly his jeans began to fray above the knees where he wiped the rubber cement from the knife blade, cutting the denim fabric as he did so. But he became more skilled at slicing out lines. Less and less often did he have to ask for a correction to be retyped after he'd slit through the first corrections, trimmed off the tops and tails of letters, smudged cement across other lines, hitherto fine, now gummy and smeared. Bobbie's confidence was infectious. 'Of course you can do it. All you need is a good eye and a steady hand. Have a joint and calm down.'

'I'll cut myself,' he said.

'Ugh, blood,' she said. 'You'll probably faint. You're not a haemophiliac are you ? There's a first aid chart behind that partition. Maybe you'd better study it. Or maybe you'd better not.' Soon his fingers were serrated with little cuts and encrusted with rubber cement.

'Old horny hands,' said Bobbie. 'Here, give us a feel. I'm getting horny typing out all this stuff.'

'Whatever you say,' he'd say.

'It's like sex,' she said. 'No one ever tells you how to do it. You just do it and you find out as you go along. You hope. Most things are like that. You don't need to have a Ph.D. before you start. You just start doing it. It's called learning on the job.'

'All right,' he said.

'We could fuck on the floor but it's hard and there aren't any cushions, or we could go home.'

There were always problems, they lurched from crisis to catastrophe, and back again, yet avoided disaster. The pages all came out in the right order. They pasted up the typesetting in sixteen page sections on huge sheets of paper on Graham's floor. The television picture keeping one corner of the room alive with colour, the record player providing sound. The principle was to take a sheet of typing paper, fold it, fold it again, fold it yet once more, sixteen pages counting on both sides, all you had to do was to make sure they were all the appropriate way up, numbering the little booklet of folded paper like a book and then opening it all out, seeing which page fell where in a sixteen page section.

The big problems began when the books arrived. The books presented the problem of bulk. They couldn't get them up the flight of steps to Graham's so they stored them in Bobbie's flat, against the wall, beneath the bed.

'It's like living in a warehouse,' she said.

'You should like that. Pretend it's a loft.'

'Lofts are huge.'

'Pretend it's a little loft.'

'Stuffed with boxes of books.'

'It will be an incentive to sell them,' he said.

They spread copies of the first two titles on the floor, on the bed, gazed at them fondly, critically, doubtfully.

'If we send out review copies that will get rid of some.'

And they began the endless process of stuffing books into packets, folding cardboard, stapling padded bags, addressing, addressing, addressing. They assembled

a list of magazines and reviewers on index cards. It became a new outlet for the obsessive list making that was always ready to engulf either of them.

'It's better giving away copies for publicity than having them all just sitting there in their boxes,' said Graham.

'You reckon ?'

'It'll get them around. That should get people to buy them.'

'What if the only people who would buy them are the people we've sent copies to anyway ?'

'Then we're in trouble.'

'There are some people calling themselves publishers,' said the manager of one of the big British publishers dominating the book trade, 'who don't even have warehouses.'

This was the beginning of the organization of publishing around warehousing logistics. The rule of the fork-lift truck. They were taping a television discussion about new developments in publishing, always new developments, for an educational programme. It didn't get high ratings. Shown at seven on a Sunday morning it wasn't many peoples' chosen viewing. But it was all publicity, all promotion. If the British colonialists thought it worth while turning up to have their say, then Bobbie and Graham would turn up too. They would have turned up anyway.

'The issue's not so much warehouses as what books are published. And there's so much good writing that hasn't been let into print.'

No, they weren't alleging censorship, not really. It was just that the foreign run companies couldn't recognize quality in local writing because their business was to promote the imported product.

'Our business is to publish the quality local product. To show that it is there,' said Graham.

'To show the foreign publishers up ?' said the host.

'Well,' said Graham.

'That's right,' said Bobbie.

It made them a lot of enemies, this sort of thing, publishing without a warehouse, stuffing boxes of quality literature beneath Bobbie's bed.

Everything had been bottled up for so long. The anti-conscription protests had been a release but they had also been a diversion of those energies. The change of government, the provision of substantial funding for the arts, this allowed the dissemination of what had already been done but until now had been denied any

public. That was the grudge against the publishers: all these books had been written and the publishers had resisted them. There was no shortage of books to publish. Later people would talk of these years as a great cultural flowering; but the flowering had already happened; this was the period of marketing and distribution.

They had been going to do it anyway, Bobbie and Graham, they had roughly figured out the costs. But when subsidies were announced for literary publishing they applied for funding and received it. They knew it was a bad idea, to become subsidy dependent. But once there was a subsidy scheme in operation they could not afford not to participate. They would not be able to compete against subsidised books without a subsidy themselves. The subsidy had to be reflected in a lower retail price. It meant authors received less in royalties, the same percentage but a lower price to have a percentage of; the idea was that more copies would be sold if the books were cheaper and that would make up the difference, more than make up the difference, that was the idea. But it also meant that non-subsidised literary publishing was not an economic feasibility. Assistance turned into control, subsidy into censorship. It was all apparent from the beginning. Maybe it was set up that way deliberately. There was the other catch too. You depend on governmental support but what happens when the funds are unavailable, when the funding is cut back ? And that time was to come. But it was the easiest way. What other choices were there ?

There was a formula for subsidies. Bobbie got out her calculator and worked it all out. If you printed a thousand copies the subsidy pretty well covered the cost of printing. If you printed two thousand, it covered half the cost, three thousand, two thirds of the cost. Print five thousand and the entire cost of typesetting and printing was covered by the subsidy. So they printed five thousand of the next titles. 'Some publishers know how to work the subsidy,' some literature board officer told them. They smiled back politely. It wasn't clear whether this was something deserving of praise, doing their homework; or whether it was perceived as sharp practice.

Graham formulated a defence in case they needed one. 'We have a duty to our authors and to the public to produce the books on the best possible terms.'

'Let's hope the public appreciates us,' said Bobbie. 'All five thousand of them.'

'Let's hope we got the formula right,' said Graham.

His own publisher had had to send a title back to the printers to trim a quarter of an inch off two sides. The formula involved the precise page size and somewhere there had been a discrepancy between the estimated format and the finished book.

'And they call us amateurs,' said Bobbie.

'We may not have a warehouse but we sure know how to work a calculator,' said Graham.

'Do you ?'

'I believe in you.'

'And what happens when we've got fifteen thousand books to store ?'

'I'll still believe in you even if I can't find you amongst the boxes.'

'I'm getting sick of living surrounded by cardboard boxes.'

'I thought you liked it,' said Graham. 'I thought you got an erotic charge fucking on top of all those books. The pleasure of the text.'

'One day they're going to collapse on somebody and they'll find them crushed on the mattress.'

'Them ?' said Graham. 'You and who else ?'

'You'd be surprised,' said Bobbie. 'I'll keep it as a surprise for you.'

'I'll be able to keep you preserved between the leaves of a book,' he said. 'Like a dried flower. A souvenir of the press.'

'We have to get an office,' said Bobbie. 'This is getting ridiculous.'

'Think of it as sound proofing.'

'You're the one who goes on about noise, why don't you take some boxes.'

'Sure,' he said, 'if you help me carry them in.'

Up the stairs. Three flights of steps.

'You'll have to move,' said Bobbie. 'You'll have to get a place with storage facilities.'

And so the days went by, arguing in the later afternoon amidst the cartons of books, fucking on the mattress on cartons of books, resting coffee cups and plates on temporary tables of book cartons, moving the television from carton to carton for better reception, filling out forms for subsidies, forms for listing entries in *Books in Print*, forms for registering for printing subsidies, forms for prize awards. They filled in a second form for Rolof's prose poems. They'd been refused a subsidy for a poetry volume so they called them prose and tried again and succeeded.

'What's the difference ?' said Bobbie. 'Who reads this stuff anyway ?'

'We have to create a public. Nobody reads it because hardly anyone knows it exists.'

'Now you tell me,' said Bobbie.

Occasionally they went to the pub but that world was dying, transmuting into something new, perhaps, but it was not a friendly new. Too many years of drinking on were showing themselves now, a dulled alcoholic resentment was emerging. And it emerged all the more strongly and all the more resentfully as those who could escaped into the new Labor bureaucracies: press officers, research assistants, and other less clear, less defined, vague roles in Canberra offices. Or they were off

making movies, carried along on the flow of subsidies, loans, tax concessions. So the pub now seemed even more sluggish, turned in on itself. The days of talking dreams were passing and the dreams were either being materialized or they were fading for ever.

'Why didn't you make it a co-operative ?' said Gwen, with her rich-bitch, new-found radical chic.

'Well, it is, a co-operative of two.'

'Why didn't you set it up as a co-operative ?'

'Because it's simpler to set up a limited liability company.'

'Did you try ?'

'Why would we need to try ? What does it matter ?'

'You're trying to get into the capitalist rat race ?'

He could have said, and what bigger racing rat than you, supported by your father's bent business ? He should have said it. But he didn't. He just moved away. Pushed through the mass of people, all grown bulkier, heavier, fatter, taking up the space of those who had left.

Joe likewise had drifted away. They never coincided there. He had tired, Joe, of the standard bonhomie; there was a limit to how often you wanted to hear someone say your stories were boring, why didn't you write something worthwhile. There wasn't much to go down for any more.

So Friday nights and Saturday afternoons and Sunday afternoons they spent typesetting, pasting up, packing and unpacking books, the television and the record player pulsing away at the perimeters, and Bobbie would tell him gross episodes from her past as they sat amidst the boxes of books, smoked, made coffee.

It was a new world of new data, new sources of information about the very sources of information. Now Graham started to learn things. Now it was a world of booksellers and literary editors, publishers and journalists, and the myriad of free-lancers who swam around its reaches, part-time packers and proof-readers and reviewers, copy editors and promotional consultants, arts bureaucrats and sales reps. It was a new vision. Especially from the sales reps and from the sales figures that came through the bureaucratic councils, book promotion, arts, libraries. Publishers were very tight-lipped about the figures; how many they printed, how many they sold, how many they remaindered, how many they pulped. Information about these areas rarely reached the public; but there was a world of gossip within the industry and as Bobbie and Graham moved around this world they began to discover the mysteries of the trade. It was evident that some of the distinguished names in the literary business sold very few

copies at all. But it was in somebody's interest to prop them up, supply them with contracts time and again. This was what Graham failed to take into account, the nature of this interest. If a writer was propped up, whoever suggested or supplied the props was going to be unhappy to see them hacked away by injudicious talk about sales figures. His comfortable suspicions were disturbingly confirmed. He stood amazed at the sustained secrecy about print runs, sales figures. Any concept of the free flow of information had no place in the communication industry. Instead there was hype, bland lies, a positive official image. And the secret trucking to the scrap paper merchants for pulping into egg cartons. And all the money lost presumably knocked off against tax on the profits made on something else.

The other factor that at last became clear was the way books sold that it was decided would be sold. His academic experience ill-prepared him for understanding this process. He had believed in that brave forties and fifties experiment of open and free access to higher education. It was an open door and talent was directed to the top. It hadn't quite been like that in practice. If he'd been directed anywhere it had been to Australia which was clearly not perceived to be a top. But books, literature, he had assumed followed the same proclaimed model, privileged and hallowed as some sort of ideal ascent of the good and true. But the normal business practice, no surprise to anyone but Graham, and yet not ever explicitly voiced as the mode of procedure, was to put the advertising and promotional effort behind a handful of each month's books, and let the rest sink. Not even sink or swim. Just sink. The handful would have the counter displays, the piles of copies prominent, stacked on the tables, stacked on the floor, the feature stories in the press, the television spots. These were the bestsellers. The bestsellers were the books it had been decided were bestsellers and backed with the appropriate promotional budget and effort, whether they sold or not. It wasn't a career open to talents with the ones that kept on selling emerging as bestsellers. It wasn't market forces unless you saw that this was the market. The bestsellers were already determined by the bulk in which they were shipped to the shops.

'Look, if a shop has a couple of hundred copies of a title, it's going to list them as a bestseller whether they're moving or not, so they don't get stuck with them. It's as simple as that.'

So what about the slow development of critical approval, the spread of enthusiasm amongst the individual readers ? That was too slow, too unpredictable. It was better to line up the friendly interviews in advance, co-ordinate a campaign. And even where the campaigns seemed not very co-ordinated, the effect was the same. The best-seller treatment, even if perfunctory and ramshackle, far from head office in London or New York, still created the category of the best seller. And how insignificant a part was literature in this turnover of product. Yet how bitterly fought

over and how tightly controlled. Literature rolled along the top of the heavy sea, the handful of token copies, the privilege of status, the cash rewards not discussed. And with sales figures so low it would be possible to challenge the existing order of things, to enter that self-appointed and self-perpetuating world of the literary figures, wouldn't it ? If they were self-appointed. If you could get through the cordons, if you could survive the different ways of being knocked out of the game. If authors could be propped up, they could also be pulled down, and books could be published and vanish, issued without publicity and without promotion, the reps not even bothering to show them round. He learned that publication did not always mean what it might be thought to mean.

And then there was fame. Promotion, Bobbie called it. Publicity. It meant getting your picture in the press. Any press, the more the better. Books were fashionable and writers and publishers too; they were soon to be replaced by movies and movie stars, in their turn replaced by music. The new music. It was always the new. The constant need for innovation. Whose need was never asked. To Bobbie it was all natural. The American way. Fame was the spur. You sang backing in a rock group. You played competition tennis. You designed clothes. You played in movies. It was all the same, all fame. 'Well, that's how the media sees it so it's up to you.'

'It displaces attention from what you're doing or what you're writing onto the personality,' Graham said.

'Don't knock it,' said Bobbie. 'Your personality may not be crash hot but it's more appealing to *Vogue* than what you're writing.'

It all seemed unreal. It was all unreal. Vanity Fair. The big show. It wasn't clear that this actually sold books. 'Do the people who read *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* read these sort of books ?'

'Hope not,' said Bobbie. 'But the booksellers read the magazines and they see you in them and think you're a hot property and order the books.'

'Wouldn't it be easier to go straight to the booksellers ?'

'No. We do anyway. But they've got to hear about you somewhere else. That way they think it's real. Television would be best. If we could get you on one of the quiz shows.'

'Oh,' said Graham. 'Television is reality.'

'You bet,' said Bobbie. 'Get on television and then you're a celebrity. That's what you've got to be to sell books. A celebrity.'

Unreal and transitory. The transitoriness was something he was always conscious of. One day it would all go and there wouldn't be any publicity, any promotion, any existence. Beyond reality.

'Why do you two always read through the weekend papers ?' Rachel had asked Joe and Graham.

'We're looking for our names,' Joe had said. 'The only difference is, I find mine but Graham never finds his.'

That was the nightmare. The knowledge that profusion would be replaced by absence. The only thing to do was to do everything, accept everything, appear everywhere, while you were still wanted. He knew it would change though he had no knowledge of what it would be like when it did change. But he had read enough novels and biographies to know the pattern. Of course, it mightn't happen to him, like death. But its presence was always there, behind the shoulder, in the blind spot, breathing down your neck as you drove or walked or read or wrote. There was a line in one of his old English master's poems from the first world war: 'That bastard there behind me isn't really there at all.' And with enough noise going on, enough flurry and frenzy, you could ignore it for a while. For a while.

'How would you like to be Bachelor of the month ?' said Clare, one of Joe's girlfriends, working for one of the up-market women's magazines.

'Do I have to take my clothes off ?'

'If you like. We only need a head and shoulders shot for the photo though.'

'I'll have to think about it.'

'Not for too long,' said Clare.

'How long ?'

'By four o'clock,' she said. And added her own doubts to negate his, to let him know there were obligations, qualifications, disqualifications. 'You're not married or anything awful like that, are you ?'

'No,' he said.

'And you're not homosexual ? We have to be very careful about that. Especially with bachelors. One slipped past us once. It was a frightful embarrassment.'

'What happened ?'

'They sacked the girl who arranged it. That's how I got the job.'

'I see.'

'There's nothing awful you haven't told me is there ? There's nothing going to come out of the woodwork and embarrass us. You would tell me if there was, wouldn't you?'

He was lost, didn't know what to do, impaled and waiting to be tossed high by fame and hesitant at the dubiousness, the vulgarity, the idiocy of it.

'Of course you should,' said Bobbie. 'Do you good to take off that tweed jacket.'

'I don't know.'

'We'll get the photo made up into a poster. We can get them round all the bookshops. Put them up on campus.'

'Thanks,' he said.

'It's a break,' she said.

And the more media exposure, the more media people they met.

'We're going to subscribe to a clippings service,' said Bobbie.

'Can we afford it ?'

'Probably not. But we need it. You want to see everything they say about you, don't you ? You can stick them in your cuttings book.'

'I don't have a cuttings book.'

'Apology. File them in your publicity files.'

'I guess I could,' he said.

'Done,' she said.

They systematically bought copies of the media they might find exposure in, reading whatever they came across about the media, about other publishers, other editors, broadcasting people. It was a time when the media was beginning to give itself more coverage, writing about media, featuring media as a media feature, the short march to the television talk show with the guests all talk show hosts, all exchanging favours to appear on each other's show, or paying off for having appeared, the media gazing at its own resplendence, absorbed in the self-referentialism of creation that was simultaneously taking hold of the world of art and literature, the gradual exclusion of reference other than self-reference, the disinformation that had replaced information now itself replaced by de-information, de-education.

Rolof gave a party. They drove up the coast past the beaches and caught the ferry to the island. He met them as they disembarked.

'Welcome,' he said. 'Welcome to the party. I hope you brought some food. This is a poet's party. I have no royalties so we have no food. Poet's soup, that is what we have. If you can eat poet's soup you may survive.'

'Your royalties aren't due yet,' said Bobbie.

'But I must live, I must eat. The book is published, why is there no payment.'

'If you look at your contract -'

'Ach, I never read those things.'

'It tells you royalties are paid every six months.'

'And what do I do till then ?'

'Get a job,' said Graham.

He loved it out of the city, the clear air, the stretching water, the gum trees overhanging the tracks amidst the houses, the receding sound of the ferry. He stood looking at the trees against which nothing seemed very significant. Certainly not royalty payments.

'There's not going to be much anyway,' he said. 'I wouldn't count on making a fortune.'

'You're privateers not publishers,' said Rolof. 'My book has been privated not published. There's nothing public about it at all except the public funds you've acquired.'

'You're lucky it ever got published,' said Bobbie.

'That is the point I am making, it hasn't been published, no one even knows it exists.'

'Take some copies and spread them around,' said Bobbie. 'We've got five thousand, it doesn't look like we'll be needing them all.'

'So what will you do with five thousand books if you don't sell them ?'

'We'll give you a box in lieu of royalties.'

'No,' he said, 'no, I will not accept them.'

He turned away, greeted his other guests. 'Welcome to the party. Poet's soup. I hope you enjoy poet's soup. If you visit a poet you must starve like a poet. If my publishers paid me royalties we could eat. Since they don't, they must starve too. All we can do is drink. I see you brought plenty to drink. We have lots to drink. Everything except food. Now you will have the experience of the life of literature. Poet's soup for the life of the imagination.'

He led them up the hill, gums soaring high above them, the track ochre, the barks silver, grey, red, the birds calling out above them, currawongs, kookaburras, cockatoos.

Everyone got drunk. Some might have stayed sober and gone home but no one noticed them. Those who stayed got drunk. The poet's soup was soon consumed,

basically potatoes. Then there was nothing to do except drink. And having got them all there, starving and drunk, Rolof let them miss the ferry back. A few wise ones were already down at the wharf waiting for it; but back at the house it was all the blind pursuit of oblivion.

'So you are depressed, how depressed is that ? If you are really depressed why don't you do something about it ? If you are really suicidal and not just being literary, why not do it ? Here, take this kitchen knife, go ahead, it's sharp enough. Let us see how suicidal you are.'

The voices spread through the dark night.

'They're going to kill me. I can sense them out there. I thought if I left New Guinea I would be safe. But they've tracked me down. I know they're out there waiting.'

'It's a good knife, it will be quick. Why wait for them to do it ? You can't keep on moaning like this, that just isn't serious. If you are serious, kill yourself now.'

But the moaning went on.

The numbers thinned out, desperate guests would break out and head for the water. No one would swim, there were probably sharks. A couple stole boats, rowing dinghies pulled up on the sand and their oars left in them.

And then the dawn.

'We have no breakfast. Water, perhaps, if the tank is not empty. The dregs of wine. All we have for sure is poetry. For breakfast we have raw poetry, I will read you some, this is the life of literature, this is what you will have to sustain you through the day.'

'We'll have a big party,' said Bobbie. 'We'll invite everybody.'

'What, reviewers ? Booksellers ?'

'Everybody,' she said. 'All of them. Journalists, television people, everybody..'

'Friends ?'

'Friends too.'

'So we can pay back all the people we owe invitations to.'

'I don't know about you,' said Bobbie, 'but I don't think I owe anybody anything. I think it's enough to go to their lousy parties without having to have them back.'

'I guess so.'

'I don't see we have to invite them back unless we like them.'

'Sure.'

'Rolof ? You're not suggesting we invite him back ? Not after that ?'

'He's one of our authors.'

'We'll remainder him. He's cancelled.'

'If we can't invite our authors, we're in trouble.'

'Their books don't sell, that's why we're in trouble.'

'Nobody sells more than a couple of hundred of that sort of thing.'

'Now you tell me,' said Bobbie. 'So why did we publish it ?'

'Well, to give it a go. It's the only way to find out. It didn't cost us anything.'

'It cost us time and effort.'

'I suppose it did. All right, no more poetry.'

They had decided at the beginning, no poetry. There were too many poets and too few readers of poetry. Graham had stressed that poetry was out, it didn't sell, the poets were too much trouble, they could publish their own poetry anyway, it didn't need much typesetting, the books were always short. And yet they'd ended up with poetry, it had slipped past them, somehow the poets had bamboozled them. And the sales, or lack of them, had confirmed all their better judgements which they hadn't followed, told them everything they already knew.

'We've got to invite our authors.'

'They're not acceptable as human beings.'

'What about as party extras ?'

'I guess they'll swell the numbers. Just as long as I don't have to talk to them.'

'It might be best if you don't,' he said.

'We can't go on like this,' Bobbie said.

Graham sat on the steps of his place and looked at the harbour, little lighters and tugs nosing around amidst the barges and moored cargo ships. The sun spread over the moorings.

'For a start we've got to make some money. Either we make more money or we pack it in and I have to get a job.'

'So how do we make more money ?'

'Sell more books.'

'Sounds simple enough.' He didn't want to think about it. He wanted to drink his tea and close the door and start writing. Use the freshness of the morning to get something down on paper.

'The only way we can do it is import titles. If we've got enough titles then it's worthwhile going round the shops. If we don't have enough, it isn't worth it.'

'Where will we put them ?'

She looked round the room.

'You've got plenty of space here.'

'There's the steps.'

'You think they keep you safe. As long as you've got the steps you think we can't get any books in here. Maybe you should move.'

'I like it here.'

'Maybe you could get your salary paid into the company,' she said. 'Then I could live off that and you'd save on tax.'

'I'm not sure I can do that,' he said.

'You can always find out.'

'I can try,' he said, 'I don't think they'd like it.'

'I don't like the way it is now,' she said. 'We've got to do something. We've got to get an office with some storage space. I can't live like I'm living now. I can't move for boxes of books.'

'We're not making enough money to rent a place.'

'That's why we've got to make more.'

He would happily have left things as they were. Hobby publishing. A small press with an occasional title. All he wanted to do was break even. But if Bobbie was proposing to live off the operation it had to be something different. And since the part-time work she'd been doing, a bit of type-setting, a bit of promotional work, seemed to be drying up, she had to find some way to live. But it meant a change in the whole concept. It introduced an awful seriousness; from leisure activity to small business.

What it seemed mainly to involve was carrying boxes of books. Bobbie found a house in which she could live upstairs and have an office and warehouse downstairs. They began importing from American small presses, books that had hardly been known and certainly not available till they brought them in, but that soon found a market. Avant-garde but not too avant-garde. The avant-garde of thirty years back: that was what sold. And the new began to seep through along with it.

So it was a life of opening boxes and stacking shelves. And rearranging the shelves. Every month one of them would have a new idea for arranging the stock. New titles would have flooded in and half the shelves would be crammed with no further space available and the whole alphabetical system thwarted. They were always arranging the warehouse.

'It'll keep you fit. You need the exercise,' said Bobbie.

He looked at it that way, positively, for a while. In the end it became an irritation, a craziness. But by then it was only one of many. By then the contradictions had started to become unavoidable.

He had wanted to publish because he had been missing literature. All that anti-war activity had been so busy, so unreflective, so present. The creative reveries had been squeezed out. He wanted to return to the creative, to art, to literature. But publishing, the experience of publishing, delivered a new insight into the economic realities of the business, the system of controls. Increasingly book distribution had come under the domination of the multinational houses, and the independent distributors were gradually bought up or closed down. And the big bookshop chains preferred to deal with a limited number of big suppliers, with the multinationals, and not to have to bother with small outfits. Even the booksellers association asked for a smaller number of suppliers. He began writing articles about the problems of Australian publishing and the problems of foreign ownership and the problems of multinational control of the publishing industry. Politicized again.

Importing American small press books, American avant-garde writing and that European writing that the Americans sponsored seemed one way of confronting this future of standardized commodity production from the multinational entertainment industry. And it provided them with enough product to afford a sales rep, it supplemented their own limited production and gave them enough titles to make the operation viable. Maybe. In the end importing began to take up nearly all their energy, there was less time to spend on publishing, and less incentive; publishing made so little money, often made none at all, while importing gave them steady sales. They started becoming like the multinational houses they had begun by opposing, putting their energy into the imported product at the expense of their local publishing programme.

For a while it was all exciting. In trying to capture a new society new forms and new approaches were necessary. Graham had no doubt about that. Simply to replicate traditional models would be to perpetuate old ways of feeling. So he opened himself to these formal experiments of the sixties and seventies. This was the new writing they celebrated. This was the new writing they imported and promoted. But the generation of new forms for new experiences all too rapidly began to evolve into a new formalism. Experience and observation and representation began to be less the concern than formal experiment. Self-reflexiveness emerged and bloomed, form concerned with form alone, writing increasingly devoid of content or substance, writing that set itself against social significance, social change. Gradually he came to see a sinister purpose in that aspect of post-modernism that insisted on a separation of literature from the social world, that presented art as an autonomous end. It was serving to remove one of the instruments of social analysis and challenge. Literature moving into a realm of so-called pure art, pure form, pure literature serves to confirm and leave unexamined the existing political and social structures. And this was what

they were promoting, this was what they were importing. At the very moment that their problems with multinational domination and the widespread dissemination of commodity rubbish was revealing the whole system of controls. Was the American avant-garde just another arm of the same octopus ? He thought it was. And it was one of the multitude of things that led to his withdrawal from the partnership.

11. FESTIVAL

Graham flew down to the writers' festival. He saw Kitty on the plane and gave a cautious nod. At the airport there was a shortage of cabs. Kitty was being met by the girl she was staying with and they offered him a lift into town. He phoned up Peter's where he was staying but there was no reply so he took the lift with them and had dinner with them and sat around drinking and ended up in bed with Kitty. 'I thought that was going to happen,' the girl whose house it was said as she walked into the spare room. The next day was a seminar on literary magazines and someone proposed a central organization for them all, literary, political, feminist, cultural, which could reduce overheads and rationalize distribution and could assemble a master mailing list of subscribers to all magazines. Kitty said she certainly wasn't going to hand over her subscribers to any master list, not even a mistress list. People who subscribed to magazines didn't expect their names to go on some central file. It brought a note of suspicion into the proceedings and other editors leapt forward to offer their lists of subscribers.

That night Kitty's friend had some more people arriving and Kitty had to surrender the spare room for the living room couch. 'Come back anyway,' she said, but Graham demurred, he was getting so demure, was that it ? 'Well, let's go to your friend Peter's place,' she said, but he demurred again at that, that wouldn't be cool, Lily was coming down the next day and he didn't want Peter making knowing cracks about Kitty to Lily. They had dinner and walked back to the friend's place so he could collect his bag. Kitty wanted to fuck in a park on the way. 'It's not even a park,' he protested, 'it's just a strip of trees between two rows of houses.' 'No one will notice,' she said, 'and anyway who cares if they do ?' But he felt demurer than ever, a chill recoil was creeping all around him, a terror of the body, nakedness, womankind, betrayal, he couldn't focus on what specifically, wouldn't. She harassed him some more but he kept refusing. 'This is grotesque,' he said, 'it's like being a teenager with nowhere to go.' 'There's plenty of places to go,' she said, 'there's the park.' 'It's not a park.' 'There are hotels, we can get a hotel for the night.' He couldn't think of the answers, what were the answers girls had given him when he had been the harasser, the only one he could remember was they had their periods. They walked up to a phone box and he tried phoning Peter again who still wasn't answering. 'We could fuck in here,' said Kitty, squeezing into the phone box with him, was she deliberately tormenting him or did she really want to fuck him or did she really want to fuck, him being immaterial, or was this some sort of test, seeing how he'd react, and the

consequences being the usual consequences of these sort of challenges, busted by some cruising police car, he could see it all happening.

Lily arrived the next day and they went to some reception in some rolling grounds, drinking fresh wine, young wine, immature wine, something alcoholic, and a visiting English critic asked Lily to go walk round the rolling grounds, and every time Kitty came up to talk to Graham and share a bottle of the young wine the visiting critic made another Sir Galahad attempt, saving Lily from Kitty's raids on her man by taking her off altogether. Graham tried to talk to the critic, he always tried to talk to visiting critics and editors and writers and publishers, but the critic answered only in pale monosyllables, preserving his scrupulous discriminations and pursing his lips at the literary degradation of the great south land. Lily and Graham and Kitty and her man and it seemed like half a dozen other people got a cab back to town, Kitty grabbing the steering wheel to assist the driver, they got out at Peter's place, Kitty and boyfriend, and then the cab went on with whoever else was in it, English critic and maybe a few others who refused to get out with them for another drink, and Kitty vomited on the pavement. They went in and made coffee and Graham gave up on the tensions and climbed into his bed and had passed out when Kitty nosed him out there like a wasp marauding for young wine or rotten fruit and began to buzz all over him. Lily came in with a coffee, 'Oh yes,' she said, and Graham pulled her onto the bed, his arm around her , and then they were all in bed together, undressing each other with some confusion, fucking and freaking, Kitty's boyfriend came in and stormed off, 'Why didn't you ask him to stay ?' asked Lily. 'That's his problem,' said Kitty, and they writhed there in this tangle of sheets and bodies, Graham in happy alcoholic confusion of indiscriminacy, anxious not to miss out on anything, anxious to apportion equal attentions, anxious not to upset anyone, relieved to see Kitty and Lily embracing, startled by Lily's yowl of pain, 'You bit me,' struggling up, moving to another room, 'I'll leave you two to it, I'm going.' Graham tried to hold on to her and they fell off the bed, Kitty wandered off to phone another cab, and the afternoon passed away and it all seemed very evanescent if fleshly, very hard to reconstruct in the memory, fraught with alcohol and tension.

The next evening there was a bleak reception in a bleak institutional building, again plenty of booze, Lily and Graham and Peter and his girlfriend went along, they talked politely to academics and editors, and some bug-eyed monster explained how sorry he was Graham had been so badly reviewed in his journal, they had sent the book out and the reviewer had hated it, what could they do ? They could have chosen a more sympathetic reviewer in the first place, did he say that or did he suppress that? Graham couldn't remember, but he was being controlled, no craziness, the next day he had to appear on some seminar panel, he didn't want to wipe himself out, it was

like a school dance in the gym, maybe it was a drill hall, suddenly there was almost no one there except Uncle Toby Oates who loved to hang around the scene and watch scandal in the making but would usually acquire a copy of any ephemeral publication, preferably not paid for, to list in a bibliography sometime, Uncle Toby blinking at them over his toad pouches, the bug-eyed editor, and Graham and Peter and Peter's girl and Lily, so they left, suddenly they were terribly out of it, Peter and Graham, after a boring cautious evening's drinking they were incoherent, trying to find undrunk bottles in the servery behind the hall, planning to drive off to some other scene, there must be a better, there must be a better scene going on somewhere, they all piled into the car, not bug-eyes and Uncle Toby but the four of them and Peter launched off, though with some difficulty, his driving seemed to have disintegrated, they went half a block and his girlfriend was yelling at him 'Let me drive,' 'I'm all right,' he insisted, 'He's all right,' said Graham, 'He's drunk,' 'We've hardly drunk anything.' 'Well, stop the car, I'm not going with you like this,' and she insisted they stop and she got out and Lily followed. 'What're you doing ?' said Graham. 'You're both as drunk as skunks,' said Lily. 'We didn't drink any more than you did.' 'Well, you're both out of it, you'll kill someone, we're walking home.' 'We can't be drunk,' said Peter, 'we've spent that last hour trying to find something to drink.' 'Let me drive,' his girlfriend said, and they argued, there was the familiar, incoherent arguing scene but in the end Peter surrendered, Graham surrendered, finding it too hard to argue, the world vibrating around them, the colours of the night swirling, illuminated by the joyous craziness of streetlights and neon, streaks of incandescence and glowing viscosity amidst the encroaching murk, they sank back into the back seat laughing at each bend, cheering at every traffic light, and when they got back to Peter's they started to be sick, Graham vomited most of the night, lay in bed all morning, by four in the afternoon he could sip weak tea without vomiting up, so much for the seminar panel, yet another brilliant absence for the curriculum vitae, how could they have got so wiped out ?

They went to a party that was supposedly more fringe, more alternative. 'At least we might get a smoke,' said Graham. The heavy international literary figures were off at some exclusive reception amongst the local socialites; the socialites were not interested in meeting local writers. There was a strict grading system: international writers flown in who got to go to the heavy parties; grade one local writers who got to go to some socialite parties but not many; grade two local writers who got to speak at some of the functions alongside grade one local writers; and the grade three young writers, alternative poets, fringe people, who got a small contribution to their rail fare but were generally not invited to occasions where they might misbehave. There weren't even many of these grade threes at the party. It was

the *jeunesse dorée*, the wicked sons and daughters of the socialites and would be socialites, wearing art student fashions, para-military combat gear now replaced by vogue punk. But there were a few people blowing joints in the kitchen and Graham hung out there. Lily passed a joint to a young man called Nigel but later when she asked him for a cigarette he made a whole scene about people bumming cigarettes. They started to have an argument and Graham lumbered over, telling Lily not to worry, Nigel was a well-known cheapskate from way back and this only added fuel to the flames. Otherwise it was just another boring party.

Uncle Toby walked over with them to the festival bar one evening, maybe he even suggested they went over together and had a drink. The streets were lined with art objects, cut-out figures hanging by the neck from trees, outline figures on the pavements like the outlines police put around bodies that have fallen out of windows or suffered some other cause of violent death. The wind was bitter and Lily was shivering in a summer dress, so Uncle Toby insisted on drawing her to him to keep her warm. Graham had never thought of him in a sexual way, just an old avuncular archivist, but the whole theatre had its sexual note and Graham found himself getting irritated, moody, surly, and getting even more irritated and moody and surly at the absurdity of his reaction. And so there was Uncle Toby grabbing at Lily as they crossed the windswept roads and Graham glowering at them, the traffic, the figures hanging from the trees.

They'd been sitting in the bar for a while when a shaven-headed, leather jacketed male Caucasian in his late twenties sat next to them and then stood up, lurching across with a heavy, square-edged cognac bottle, and asked Graham if he was Graham. Graham said he was. 'I'll teach you to be nasty to my friend Nigel,' he said, and raised the bottle above his shoulder, screwed up his face into some ferocious expression and hung there, the bottle about to be swung down. 'That's a bit heavy, isn't it ?' said Graham, the words found for him, sitting there, no chance to stand up, and clearly he was no match for this organised aggression. 'Yes it is,' said the friend of Nigel, lowered the bottle, and spat in Graham's face.

Following the precepts of non-aggression and rational non-reaction Graham sat there, stunned, and Lily produced some tissues from her bag.

'What happened ?' said Uncle Toby, 'what happened ?' He had been sitting next to them and seen nothing, the archivist blinked. And no one else seemed to have seen anything, the friend of Nigel's left, people were still talking, carrying on as ever, and Graham sat there wiping the spit off his face, feeling the trembling in his legs.

It left him jumpy, anxious, watching the edges of every crowd in case some other thug was hanging out there, terrified at first to go into the bar again, or to hang round the coffee urn before or after any of the sessions, and he babbled on to people about it, going over and over it, the whole aggression so discrepant with the trivial cause, was this envy of his literary successes, how could anyone think of that as success, but maybe Nigel's own non achievements rankled, maybe a class hostility, maybe now funds were drying up the artistic fringe was turning sour, the overcrowded rats with reduced supplies turning against each other, maybe if you evolved an aesthetic of punk and violence then it inevitably issued behaviouraly, art could not be separated from life, didn't he know that, wasn't this just an example of something he theoretically announced but had never thought through, if you hang around the avant-garde of aggression then what can you expect except aggression, was that it, was it local figures resenting people from other states, was it just a drunken psychopath overreacting, a lone nut, was it just psycho-theatre with no intention of bringing down the bottle, wasn't this what you watched on stage or saw in the galleries, was he just freaking out at the breaking of the frame ?

And the very irresolution was the potent aspect, the way nothing had happened so more might happen, the lack of closure, the threat of something else and something unknown. And where would he be more vulnerable than giving his paper, what was to stop a bottle being thrown at him then, the still, clear target, everyone focussed towards him and someone coming in at the back and just hurling something, bottle, stone, knife, or firing, it was not knowing how crazy the friend of Nigel's was, or whether a friend of a friend might be even crazier.

He said to one of the organizers he was expecting some trouble maybe, probably not but someone had come at him in the bar out of the blue, had they got any bouncers who could just keep an eye on things, he didn't want to cause trouble, just avoid it.

And so here he was being trouble, the trouble was now located on Graham, why had they ever invited such a source of trouble who misses one panel appearance and now asks for bodyguards for the next, he could see the school-marmly annoyance, all the disapproval of the victim, girls who get raped deserve it, there are no *actes gratuites*, what was this unknown anonymous aggressor, Graham was clearly the source of all trouble, this will be, and it was, absolutely the last time we invite him.

And the paper, surely not, how many people had he blabbered on to about it, how many people had he blabbered on to about the bottle incident, he blabbered on to anyone who would listen, sitting around getting drunk, raving on, getting stoned, this was the essence of delight for Graham, sitting around raving on, how many people

had he raved onto about what he was going to say in his paper, for certain he hadn't kept it under wraps and secret.

The paper, was this when it all started, they had asked him to talk on fact and fiction or some similar alliterative nonsense, and in the exhilaration of craziness, the hubris of discovery, he wrote a fictional reading of recent events, how to read politics, or the pursuit of the plot, the fiction writer's compulsion for conspiracy theories, nothing arcane in that, as long as it remained carefully compressed in overseas bestsellers, remote, fantastic, unreal, but his strategy was to suggest conspiracies in recent political events, to see the change of government as a coup, to see the master hand of the department of dirty tricks, to see in the daily news the fulfilment of familiar scenarios, clever stuff, Graham, clever stuff. Maybe, he thought, he should just split, fly out, say he'd gone crazy, what was there to connect an episode of random violence, threatened and not fulfilled, with his fictional fantasy about conspiracy theory, unless conspiracy theory wasn't fiction, but then that was utter craziness, then he was in the realm of paranoia, which had succeeded utopian as the killer word of the decade. The power of the word, the power of the word for social control. And was that what he had blundered on, was that what he was confronting, the control system, and trying to lift it up a little, look underneath the curling edge to see exactly what lay behind ? Scaffolding. But who had put it up, where had the steel constructions come from ? And would reading the country of origin reveal the authors of the scenario, or were they already more than one step ahead, expecting some crass, naive decoding and accommodating that ?

And soon it seemed like everyone knew about the incident which nobody had seen, had he really told so many people, were they all so starved of gossip that this alone had spread along the telegraph, so now if he suddenly left it would look like utter craziness, but to stay and give the paper standing so exposed there, that looked like craziness too from where Graham stood. He decided to change the flight anyway, and get out straight after his session. 'Unless you're enjoying it,' Graham said to Lily, 'I don't want to drag you away.' 'Enjoying it !' said Lily.

There was a big guy, an ex-policeman who'd turned to playwriting, Graham had drunk with him a few times, he'd always waved a friendly greeting in the pub, on the street, so Graham went up to him, 'Are you going to be at my session ?' 'Depends if you're on at the beginning of the session or the end,' he said, 'I was planning to get the afternoon plane back, why ?'

'Because I'm expecting a bit of trouble, I got into this fight in the bar.' 'Oh no, not you too,' he said, 'I had some bastard needling me at the garden party and he

comes up to me with his fist up and takes a swipe and I got under his guard and laid him out cold, can you imagine, ex-policeman knocks out some bastard, imagine how they'd like that if they heard, don't spread it around, what happened to you ?' 'It's not that anything's really likely to happen,' said Graham, 'but I'd feel a lot easier if I felt there was someone there watching out just in case, and the organizers won't do anything, but I can point out where there might be trouble from if they come.' 'No worries,' said Merv.

And before the paper Graham stood there talking to Merv and they scanned the people coming in, just in case, the deterrent effect, letting anyone know that someone was watching, the point not to survey secretly and catch them after, Graham prone on the rostrum with blood oozing out of his temple, but to parade the sixteen stone deterrent so they might be discouraged from trying anything on, the point about deterrents being to display them, Graham now getting dangerously into the excitement of the drama of it, anything better than the paralysis of fear.

He gave the paper and nothing happened, one of his friendly fellow writers asked why Graham was insisting on the political when his fiction was so unpolitical, and Kitty stood up and said he had always been an unconscious Maoist and this time his errors were such and such. He grinned at them, he was so relieved to have got through without anything crazy happening, he'd managed to change position on the programme with one of the other speakers, maybe that would get his paper over with before any other friends of Nigel's arrived, though all it seemed to do was add to the general air of paranoid expectation, a mysterious change of order for no apparent reason, and the rumours about sudden violence having spread around so that there was a good theatrical edge to the event, like gladiators, or lions and Christians, maybe he could pass it all off as theatre, well it was theatre, and then the ex-policeman got a cab and helped load their cases they'd brought down to the session into the boot and escorted them to the airport and at the airport even he freaked, Graham went off for a piss and the loudspeaker system called out for the head of airport security to report to some counter or other and cops began materializing and swarming around, 'Jeez,' he said, 'I thought something really had happened,' well, maybe it had, they didn't hang around, they got into the departure lounge and away from the main hall and he sat with them on the plane and told them there was a great movie about an honest cop on TV that night and they really should watch, so Graham made a point of watching it even though it wasn't a genre he especially favoured, but he did feel a lot safer on the plane with sixteen stone of potential menace that could knock someone out at a punch, the only thing he worried about was his bag of dope, but they didn't usually search you on internal flights, and he didn't want to throw it away, he needed

something to relax with while he watched the honest cop movie and soaked in the bath and tried to wash it all away, the writers' festival.

12. NIGREDO

What Andy liked was to have them all sitting round a long table and a couple of joints passing round and a flagon of wine or a dozen cans of beer in the fridge. 'Who's got the drugs then ?' he would ask and someone would produce a block of hash or a deal of grass, he always had some himself anyway, 'I'm out,' someone would say, 'I can sell you one of these,' he would reply and produce a brown paper bag from amongst the groceries or half hidden among the books, he had these innocuous looking packages stashed away and they would sit there at the long table, and whichever house he was in there would be this long table and a couple of magazines or record sleeves on it and people sitting round, having a smoke, having a drink, raving on, and Andy sitting there and even when he wasn't head of the table he contrived to make wherever he was head of the table, orchestrating it, 'Tell us how you did something or other,' he would say, he didn't seem to mind the stories being repeated, he would have heard them told and then orchestrate their telling again when someone else arrived, and when they first arrived it would be, 'What's new then ?' so when people were at a loose end, when there was no one at the pub, no one in, no one on the streets, there would usually be company down at Andy's. And this was where people from interstate would drop in, they could usually find a spare mattress on the floor there, or call in there to find someone who would offer them a spare mattress on another floor, it was a clearing house, whichever house..

What he liked were old rambling decaying houses, the houses of the rich before the suburb had crumbled, what he liked was the throughput of interesting people, this was the scene, and the unpainted walls, and he never did get round to much structural repair or decoration, renting these old houses awaiting the excuse for demolition for when the suburb became up-market and fashionable and they could build apartments or town houses on their sites, the unpainted walls would be covered with posters for events, protest concerts, marches, poetry readings, art shows, and over the years these were superseded by framed paintings though it was never clear whether he'd bought them or received them in lieu of dope debts or other debts, but they hung there, and the spaces in between them would have pencilled phrases from Li Po or Gary Snyder, Rimbaud, Dylan, or whoever else was acceptable at that particular moment, you took your reputation in your hands offering such transcriptions, something too crass, too obvious, too clichéd, something that did not coincide exactly with the delicate balance of allowable taste there could invoke the endless howls of execration, the stoned insights that curled up in the light of day, he must have erased them, there was always a constraint from the full table of observers

and performers that would inhibit anything too transgressive of the unspelled out conventions, but idiocies must have been perpetuated though were never allowed to survive.

And there were always a few stubby pencils around, a felt pen, scraps of paper. It was always a mess, the paper always had rings of stain from coffee cups, the magazines, the poetry books were always dog-eared, they always had half an endpaper ripped out where someone had needed to write something down, but it was always possible to write something down, some bon mot would stir Andy to rustle around and find a stubby 4B pencil and he would carve it out, like he was carving out runes or the ten commandments, no one ever knew what happened to these scraps and sibylline leaves but it gave the utterer an ego blast, somebody actually writing down something that had been said, maybe it would turn up in a poem, maybe it would be written across a painting, these were the days of multi-media, breaking down the forms and boundaries, when design and ideograms had penetrated poems and words were engraven in the visual.

Graham would wander down there as things became more and more aimless, things in his life, as the previous outlets of energy and activity dried up, he wandered down to Andy's more and more, there was some sense of continuity, of keeping in touch with what people were still doing, music, writing, painting, Andy would somehow have acquired the latest record, some current publication, some new artefact, and there would be people staying there and they would sit and smoke and drink and talk. And there was a throughput of both sexes, Andy like to have his decorative audience of womenfolk, he was always trying to lure them from interstate, this was the open house, liberty hall, the last of the crash pads. And the hub of gossip, who was on with whom, who had quarrelled with whom, who had run away with whom and where.

'Another fight with Lily ?' Andy would say, 'No,' Graham would say, not always convincingly, but he knew enough not to give too much away. 'These two,' Andy would say to whoever was there, 'are amazing, there's this continual running battle.' 'No,' Graham would say, 'I'm just having some time to myself, I can't get any work done unless I have some time to myself once in a while.' 'And what's her name this time ?' Andy would say. 'No name,' Graham would say, finding a seat at the table, 'where's the dope ?' and he would pick up one of the magazines or papers lying around, flick through it, look down the contents page, check out who was doing what, what was happening or what was the same as ever or worse, this was the clearing house. And depending on his mood he would talk or listen, hold forth and argue or get stoned quietly.

'This is Kate,' said Andy.

'I remember you from the festival,' she said.

Graham looked at her again, now he remembered her vaguely from the disastrous party. Lily had remarked on her, this Charley's Angels chick, made up and groomed, that was the word, groomed, like the three policewomen of Hollywood fantasy, not exactly his fantasy, so he hadn't registered her. She'd come up to stay. She was told whatever she did not to fuck Andy, Andy said. 'How's that for a recommendation ?'

'Oh, don't,' she said, 'you shouldn't have said that, that's unfair.'

'But is it true ?' said Andy.

But they jeered him down, his visitors, Andy's machismo getting tiring to everyone these days, 'Find your dope and roll us a smoke,' they said, 'I told you I've lost it,' he said, 'Bullshit,' they said, his other visitors.

Graham left when the other visitors left, he was heading for his car when Kate rushed up, 'Get me out of here,' she said. 'Where do you want to go ?' 'Out of here,' she said, 'only I can't let Andy know I'm going with you, I'll have to pretend I'm going with them, just wait, I'll come back.' 'Sure,' said Graham, it wasn't every day women threw themselves at him, he got into the car, unlocked the passenger door, and waited. He rolled a smoke as he sat there to make it look more natural, and after much carrying on and door opening and shutting at Andy's place, the other car pulled away and then stopped in front of him and Kate got out and joined him.

'I just had to get away,' she said.

It didn't make much sense to Graham but he was at the point of no longer trying to make much sense of a lot of things, they went back to his place and sat in front of the radiator and smoked a bit, drank a bit of coffee, talked a bit and ended up in bed together. He still had that belief of never knocking back a fuck, the numbers game. The doorbell rang while they were fucking and Lily let herself in. 'Maybe we should all got to bed together,' he said to Kate, but she freaked out at that, he went out to talk to Lily, she was less than amused but she told him she'd been fucking someone at the place she shared and got interrupted by someone else from the house coming in, he didn't know what to do, did nothing, sank back into silence, Lily went off, got hassled by the police on the way back, they wanted to give her a lift, the joy had gone out of it all, had there been any joy in it ? 'You've been eyeing her off since the festival, have you ?' said Lily 'I didn't even notice her,' he said. 'So why did you go to bed with her?' He didn't know why. 'When you go away,' said Kate, he'd told her they were going away in the middle of the year, England, America, wherever, 'when you go away give me your address because I'll be over there, I'd like to see you there, I'd like to spend some time with you.' 'Sure,' he said, thinking it didn't sound like a good idea. 'I'll phone you up,' she said, 'when I've got an address and I know where I'm

going I'll phone up and let you know.' In the morning he took her to where her friends with the car were staying, she was leaving town the next day. Andy came round fishing a couple of nights later, proffering a joint. 'Such a tragic shame,' he said, 'such a beautiful body and such a terrible fuck.' 'Really,' said Graham. Maybe Andy was just covering, having made her and lost her, or not made her and lost her, but the slanty look in his eyes suggested he was trying to find out if she'd fucked Graham. So for once Graham let the conversation sit there, not drive by the need to keep it going, letting Andy rest on the silence, add to it if he wanted, the silence remained.

In winter there would be a fire burning, he liked these traditional features, paterfamilias presiding, logs of wood, good conversation. The attraction was the scene, always that luring marsh gas of the scene, the new, the latest, that special cachet of being in touch, the latest in cultural fashion, the latest drugs, 'Here man, drop some of these,' a testing ground for the untested, a clearing house for the unclear. But with the traditions maintained, the winter fire, the roast dinners, he liked to have a woman around who would cook huge roast dinners or bake home made bread, this was what made most of them rebel, this role of caterer for Andy's fluctuating family of visitors, the open house over which he would preside and for which they would provide. And on the walls those works of progressive art that reasserted the traditions: the featured stars and stripes, the pop art heroes of comic book mass media, these icons of seedy patriotism and grubby commodity production revived as images of the avant-garde. In the moment of the new the old was tirelessly reasserted. And when that faded, the new romanticism, the mystifications of feudal oppression writ large for the mystifications of contemporary oppression, Arthur, Guinevere and the rest of that unegalitarian crew. These were the theatre of his walls, the moving pictures of his magic lantern. Plus his own Warhol Polaroid shots of visitors and the scene, he would pick up his camera from where it lay on some pile of records or magazines, always lost but always around, always retrievable, and he would sit it on the table till its presence was forgotten and then some candid camera number of the wrong male addressing the wrong female, and if it was a good shot, like if it maximised embarrassment for all involved, it would be pinned on the wall there, and not only round the table shots but shots of those magnificent barbecues, the open house parties he would give where he would mingle through the crowd less inconspicuous than Gatsby and capture interesting collocations of heads, interesting arms round interesting shoulders, tentative poets with uncertain joints, the singer with the band throwing beer cans and rocks back into the crowd, maybe a politician or two from the fringes of government, or an arts administrator standing toes together, his own toes, or maybe other toes too, and of course the shots of himself with some latter

day two-eared Van Gogh, some open-necked Isadora Duncan, there he was photographed into the scene, the illusion of Morel.

There were contradictions, so there were contradictions. At least there seemed to be contradictions, not monumental assertions of stasis. The contradictions gave Graham a starting point, he would look at the photorealist celebrations of drug stores and soda siphons and ask where is the commitment in this, and Andy was never distressed, 'Where is the commitment in your work ?' he would ask, and occasionally Graham would try to tell him, now he was trying to reinsert it, the committed had seemed so out of date for so long, how could you be a progressive artist with progressive themes, how could you stand out from the wave of postmodernism, 'I never wanted to be a decadent,' wailed Graham, 'I never wanted to live in decadent times, I wanted it to be like the thirties when you could be committed and the committed was the new, when the dynamic was with political art.' And he would try to explain how he was trying to darken his delicate fictions, insert conspiracy and control, focus on the socially significant, not evade it, rediscover the positive ending, re-read the thirties to find out how to do it. Andy would smile and roll a joint, he liked it when someone was holding forth, he was not a verbal person, Andy, what he liked was to have someone performing and someone to listen and a few chicks to be impressed.

That was where Jane came in, one of these occasions, she was sitting at the table when Graham arrived, holding forth about her poetry, which was not cool, not the way she was doing it, chicks were not there to hold forth about their poetry, in fact no one was there to hold forth about their poetry except the licensed egomaniacs, those who had made egomania the substance of their art, you had to suffer them, insisting on reading their latest celebration of self, but otherwise, and especially for women, this was not cool. So Graham, readily absorbing the vibe of the place, dismissed her to the dark end of the table, didn't engage, waited till he could hold forth himself about something or other, so when he was leaving he was surprised she got up too, 'Can you give me a lift ?' she said. 'Sure,' he said, 'where to ?' She named a street. 'That's where I live,' he said. 'How convenient,' said Andy, 'isn't that cosy ?' shutting the door after them, putting out the lights, while they were still walking out to the car. So she came in for a coffee, a smoke, listened to a few records, time went by. 'You can stay if you want,' he said. 'I can't fuck,' she said. 'There's a spare bed,' he said. 'I'm not on the pill at the moment,' she said. 'Some other time,' he said. She came round the next night with some dope, they sat there smoking, talking. 'Let's go to bed,' she said. 'You're not on the pill,' he said. 'It's all right,' she said. 'What do you mean it's all right ?' 'I've counted,' she said, 'it's all right now.' 'If it wasn't all right last night I can't see how it is now,' he said. 'It is,' she said. 'It doesn't seem like a good idea,' he

said. 'I'd like to,' she said. 'I don't think so,' he said, 'wait till you're organized.' 'You're very nice,' she said, 'you're very gentle, you're not like the men I usually meet, I'd like to have a long term affair with you,' she said, 'I'd like to get to know you really well.' He wasn't sure about that last bit, that seemed a bit ominous to him, but the rest was very nice, very flattering.

'Hey man,' said Andy dropping round on his round the next day, 'give us a loan of your address book, would you ? I could do with some addresses for when I do that mail art mailing.'

Sirens, where do you get sirens now, on police cars, ambulances, fire engines; death and control, power and mayhem, that is what song the sirens sing, that is the song they always sang, it is no accident the way the word is used now, that is the meaning it always carried, the sirens sang the song of power to destroy you, they represented the police and death and injury and fire, those were the weapons, theirs was the song, so when you hear a pretty woman sing you her song, tell you her story, it's time to get along, unless it's already too late, by the time you get to know the sirens' song they have already done their work, only by that over-familiarity do you get to recognize it, and by then you've been ensnared, everything you haven't told somebody else you've told them and everything is known, everything is recorded, everything is now on file.

The black days when even the water of the harbour had a leaden quality, lying there heavy, sluggish, even though there is a bright light, up in the sky there is a bright light but the dark days shade it out. These days it was the naval barracks across the harbour that stood out, and the coal loader and the open heap of coal, its dust blowing across the water and into your lungs. These were the dark days when time and again there was no dope, or just the stalks and seeds which was effectively no dope and the darkness beginning to encroach, fringing the golden vision that is more and more encroached upon, more and more tunnel vision, and how else to keep a gold glow in the dark days, sitting at the window looking over the darkening harbour, ships from Borneo and Malaysia unloading timber, lowering the logs to float in the harbour, kept in place by chains, fanning out in patterns, and the memories of the elephants that lifted them and the men running up the side of the tree to peg in a rope and the palm fronds and the beautiful brown skinned village girls and the waterside bars and drugs.

This was the black time, the black death, the time of the black bruises of the psyche, the end of the Indian summer of hippydom, the beginnings of punk, the years the military note came back in again, the army surplus gear except that this was the gearing up, not the disposal, the year of the sneakers and the housebreaker fashions,

the days of the robots and the clones and the bugs nestled beneath the carpet, sewing themselves into their chrysalis shrouds, dreaming of the nights when they would fly as the black moths.

And across the harbour the flying foxes would pass, the slow, inexorable beat of their leather membranes, the ersatz wings without feathers, the steady tireless wings that could keep them airborne all night, looking for the fruit to suck at, the decaying over-ripe fruit they could suck at with their long flickering tongues, until they plunged back into the Moreton Bay fig trees at the water's edge and no one need ever see them, except for their screeching and their scraping, grating cries as they bumped each other away from the rottenest fruit, discarding old brittle branches, all beneath the great concealing canopy of the huge enduring trees.

If you read your *Good Soldier Schweik* you would know that every café had its resident police spy. If you read your Stendhal you would know that the literary star of many a salon was a police spy, and that many a salon was a listening post. If you read your literary history you would know the name of the game is control. And if you announce you are writing a political novel you might expect to be monitored. But it all came as a great surprise. This was the west of course, democracy, freedom, etc. These things were unbelievable and it took him the next decade to come to believe them.

'Your career was going fine till you announced you were a Marxist,' laughed Peter, not long before he orbited off to join the stars, one of the last conversations they had.

'I don't see any point in writing unless it's going to effect change, it's got to be political otherwise I can't be bothered to write it,' Graham said.

'You're mad,' said Sam. 'You're mad.'

These were the years when the writers with a career sense saw the writing on the wall.

'Where are the writers of the left ?' Graham would ask, but failed to stop for an answer.

These were the days of the inconclusive events. The phone calls when no one spoke. Just the open line. Or sometimes the receiver put down. And nothing said. 'Your secret girlfriends ?' said Lily. But they were so secret they didn't even speak when he answered the phone himself.

The car tires flat in the morning.

The signs of nocturnal occupancy in his office at university. Filter tips in the ash tray. The window blind down. And what looked like coffee stains on the desk and

on the papers left there. Was it every morning ? He wasn't a creature of any great habit. Just drugs more and more. Maybe he was a creature of great habit. But he didn't get in at any regular time. He didn't get in every day. Sometimes he went in at weekends. He had no secret way of arranging papers on his desk. But gradually, he didn't know whether slowly, he didn't remember how he'd first started to wonder about it apart from just noticing it, it seemed that most nights someone was in his office, someone had moved the electric radiator towards the chair, brought from somewhere a cup of coffee, and smoked two, three cigarettes. And left the blind down and the furniture arranged with the chair at an angle to the desk, the radiator directed towards it. Always arranged in this way. Never in any of the unremarked and various ways Graham left it.

He began to lay traps to see whether he was observing something or not. He memorized how he left the office. Empty ashtrays. Chair to wall. Electric radiator beside the bookshelves. The blind up. And he would come in and find the blind down, the chair pulled out to that familiar angle, the fire towards it, the tell tale cigarette butts. But why ? He removed the ashtrays and the window blind, donated the ashtrays to the common room and stuck the blind behind one of the bookshelves. Still the chair was moved, the radiator moved, and the cigarette butts deposited in the waste paper bin. It made no sense. Maybe it was the cleaners, and he settled with that as an explanation for a while. But the cleaners didn't clean every night. Not any more in these times of economic cut backs. This had to be someone from some activity that had been spared economic cut back.

He threw out the rubbish bin. Maybe they were looking to see who wrote to him, where the envelopes were postmarked. It seemed absurd. No one who thought about it had much doubt they already did that along the line. That was why on Mondays and Wednesdays there was never any mail. 'They're still steaming open the envelopes,' they'd say, Graham and the other wise ones, as they stood in front of their empty pigeon holes where the mail was supposed to come.

And the brown stains spilled on the book jackets. Coffee. Liquid polish. He couldn't tell. Maybe there was no need to tell. Maybe all that was to be told was that it was an unknown brown stain. Unknown Brown Stain No. 1. A clue. A sign. An indication. Just an indication that someone can sit at your desk and smoke two or three cigarettes beside a warm electric radiator and you'll never know who it is or how many there or are or what they're doing or why they're doing it. Checking on subversive thoughts in the middle of the night ? Lifting them off the walls like fingerprints ? Pencilling across the writing pad so they show up like brass rubbings ? He wasn't thinking enough thoughts, even subversive ones, to merit their coming in every night. Maybe they weren't looking, but showing. Telling him he was being

watched. And even then, it wasn't really watching. It was harassing, destabilizing on the microcosmic scale, subverting the petty realm of the individual consciousness. He couldn't see what else it could be. Of course, that he couldn't see what else it could be didn't mean it couldn't be anything else. He had to bear that in mind. But then, just to bear something in mind was probably exactly what was intended, to have the nagging fear, the permanently lodged anxiety. To be alert you had to maintain an awareness of unknown possibilities. And maintaining an awareness of unknown possibilities just freaked you out.

It was crude and obvious but why should that make it any less likely ? The over-ingenious mind prefers subtlety and complexity in reading about such games. But the simple old style tricks were still the effective ones, always had been. Like the account of the Pyongyang Art Troupe visiting South Korea and being kept awake the night before they performed by phone calls to their rooms and noise in the corridors, knocking on doors: 'the so-called operation of the "Security Planning Board" to keep our actors and actresses awake all night as revealed by South Korean reporters afterwards.' (*74 Hours Beyond the Demarcation Line,* 1985, p. 28)

Maybe I shouldn't keep all this stuff, he considered. But how can I stop them sending it ? Except by writing a letter. And that activates the list again, supposing it was ever deactivated. For a while he'd tried putting *Korea Today* and the *Pyongyang Times* on the common room table, alongside the out of date copies of *Time* and *The New Yorker* some would be agent of influence donated, and overnight, every night, they were whisked away, thrown out or taken off, and *Time* and *The New Yorker* left unthreatened in their four colour covers. Now he stopped playing amusing games and threw them away into the rubbish bin by the pigeon holes straight away. He hoped this was duly noted. He hated throwing things away. He drew the line at books, he couldn't throw out the books, the endless speeches of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and the endless pamphlets about US. intrusions across the demilitarised zone and such like, he couldn't bring himself to junk them. Maybe he should've.

'You're unique,' said Betty, back from the States, visiting her old fucks while she could still remember who they were, as she put it, in order to write her memoirs, 'No one else I know would keep a whole shelf full of unreadable commie propaganda.'

Maybe since they were right opposite the door, where K happened to be shelved, it wasn't surprising that they were the first thing she remarked upon. Maybe he should move them somewhere. Maybe he should throw them out. Along with the shelf of Mao, Marijuana and Marx. How will anybody ever believe you've gone straight with all this lying around ? Had it got to this, hiding your books, maybe even burning them like in the old days before someone burned them for you and you with

them. It looked like it, he had to concede, it certainly looked like it had got to this, and well beyond, and it was all too late to do anything about it.

And then going home one day and finding the front door open, door frame splintered, television set gone. All the drawers of the cupboard opened too, except the middle draw, unopened, unlocked, three hundred dollars still there, tabs of acid still there. Filing cabinet drawers all closed, keys on top. Money in top drawer with cheque book, passport, bank book. Maybe they got disturbed, bedroom drawers all opened too, looking for jewels, were they really ? Typewriter and stereo still there; the feeling of humiliation that the stereo equipment isn't worth stealing, fucking superior junkies. Unless it was the not so secret police pretending to be junkies. Look through the files, impossible to tell if they'd been gone through, address book, everything seemed to be there. 'One of those friends of yours,' said Valda. 'Or the people you bought the TV from.'

But why was the cash still there when they'd gone through the drawers, what sort of robbery was this ?

A letter came from his school asking him to join the old boys' association. 'We had someone visit the school researching your life for a Ph.D.' it mentioned.

Not a Ph.D. Graham had ever heard about or was ever approached about, or that was ever completed, as far as he ever knew.

He spent a lot of time wondering whether any of it was happening and why, if it was. When he tried to focus on it, it dissolved, it could all be illusion, like life itself, samsara, nirvana. The delusion of harassment imparting the delusion of significance to the empty life. These were the years of attempting his political novels, of exploring conspiracy . These were the years of the big repression, the roll back when all over the world the forces of reaction came to explicit political power. What a good time to write your radical novel. Well, the time requires it, the badness of the times at least gives it a purpose, he would say. Who to ? For too long to anyone who would care to listen.

What you never know is what you might have done or what you might be construed to have done to get on a list. Not much at all, probably. And once on a list you probably never get off. Apart from the natural conservatism of any system to prefer not to shed, not to relinquish. If you've got it, it's an asset. A backlist. Though the accountants had got into publishing and pruned out the backlists, of course. But even that could be interpreted as a selective pruning of the subversive in the name of economics. He wished they did prune other lists. But the size of the lists were the rationale of the whole operation. See what social order must be maintained in the face

of all these names. And even if you got off a list no doubt your file was merely transferred to deposit and once you got on it again, by being invited to a premature victory over fascism celebration at the East German embassy, or by sending a satiric short story to *Laughter and Pain*, published by the Bulgarian House of Humour and Satire, or maybe just by some personal spite somewhere along the line, and in the end what does it matter how you got on the list, if it wasn't one thing it would've been another, then no doubt it was simply shipped back across from deposit and reactivated. Not even shipped, just clicked back in.

He remembered the fuss when the CIA library ordered the *Directory of Poets* and *Directory of Novelists.* Hoo-hah. Well, they could always have purchased them covertly. So they must have wanted the hoo-hah. Let the poets and novelists know they were being taken notice of. And he was always turning up some reference to some surveillance, the FBI requiring its regular monthly reports on dubious writers, Gordon Liddy of the Watergate break-in doing the check up on Nelson Algren. Isn't it all routine ? Now it's computerized isn't everyone on a list, every writer, every journalist, every academic, every teacher, every unionist, every conservationist who ever uttered one questioning thought ? And as for the directories of writers, in the end he began to suspect they were probably all a secret service data collection operation anyway.

And then the blacklist. No more invitations to name your books of the year, no more being named in books of the year, no more mentions in the arts pages, no more mentions in the society pages, no more bachelor of the month, no more phone calls asking for quotable quotes. The last one had been 'What makes you feel most Australian ?' It took him all day. When she phoned back he said brightly, 'Eating magic mushrooms and being ripped off by multi-nationals.' 'Ah well,' she said.

Every time he heard someone say 'I'd like to have a long term affair with you' now a shudder ran up and down his spine, some warning masseuse of the spirit realm hot-footing it up the vertebrae. Even said, that resonant, recurrent phrase, before even the first fumbling sexual encounter. And now he wondered why, no longer the mad pursuit, now he wondered why when they swam into view or called from their rocks. Inez sent him a letter with a wiggly line scribbled along where the gummed flap stuck to the envelope: so if it were opened on the way the wiggles would be hard to reposition and the interception could be noticed. And why would she do that ? She turned up the night Lily flew off to a tropic island. Ah, the synchronicities. Inez was the one who didn't fuck. He laid it on her but she didn't. 'Listen,' he said, 'why do you keep visiting me, people only visit me if they want their manuscript looked at, if they want a fuck, or if they're police narcs.' 'I'm not a narc,' she said. But she had no

manuscript and didn't fuck. Graham wasn't satisfied either way now, whether they fucked or didn't, either way seemed inauthentic.

And Graham, was this the authentic life ? He had been under the carpet, beneath the house, up the chimney and had found no wires, no bugs, no transmitters. But the house was still pervaded by suspicion. He kept no notebooks, no scraps of paper. He put nothing in the garbage. All those stories of Mafiosi surveilled by going through their garbage, all those investigations of rock singers' garbage, you draw your own conclusions from that. When letters came he read them and burned them or deposited them in litter bins round the streets. They bore the marks of having been opened and resealed. He declined the invitation from the Defence Force Academy Library to buy his correspondence and papers. He burned the lot instead. Seven boxes of old letters, notes, cards, files, the agglomerated residue of fifteen years, the oppression of the past, it all went, from his university files and from the house, and the wall hangings too, posters and prints, memorabilia of past events, famous victories whose subject he could no longer recall, all his reading in renaissance magic and memory theatre told him that if someone is replicating your room in vision to send in bad thoughts, bad feelings, bad intentions, take away the memorabilia, that picture of the Lascaux caves, that offspring of the monarch of the glen, that lithograph of Jan, that slow accretion of artefacts to make it look like he was an artistic person, look on my walls ye mighty and despair, suddenly, finally, it went in the great holocaust, flames in the front yard, the purifying flame, the jangled vibrations viscous in the evening.

There he was in the bare room. Stone walls do not a prison make, but nothing more prison like, no starker cell could be replicated than this, the blank walls of freedom from the image, the prison house of emptiness and absence.

Nobody came, nobody went, the phone sat there unplugged, the doorbell remained unanswered.

'Why you come here alone now ?' one of the waitresses at the Malaya asked him one evening.

Sure he had read a lot of Kerouac at an impressionable age, which still continued, the reading and the impressionability, and he liked to sit there alone and look at the delicate, gentle waitresses, liked sitting there not exactly fantasising situations but letting the trace of them hover there, where the eye catches a sliver of street, Broadway Sydney, or is it George Street at this point, the disposal stores, the country music hotel, the gun shops, the sex shops, the transient note in the environs of the station, that gently stoned five o'clock moment before it fills up, only a few

solitaries eating, the girls talking to each other, the head waiter standing there impassive.

But apart from all that he came here alone now because he no longer trusted the people he used to come here with, they all seemed other than whatever he'd thought they were, one way or another, that was why he came here alone now.

13. DOG DAYS

The days of tedium. Driving round to visit the few remaining people he ever visited and no one in. Doing one more circuit of the streets in case they'd just gone out and were about to return but still no lights, no parked car. This is the emptiness literature should fill. What is literature if not a consolation for the unsatisfactoriness of living, and here was his life, unsatisfactory, committed to literature, to whose consolations he failed to turn. Writing all morning, sometimes, in the afternoon he wanted lived contact, other human life. To write all morning and read all afternoon and read and write all evening, punctured with fruitless visits to absent friends, this was insufferable, yet all he did was suffer it. Literature was stacked there with its consolations, diversions, distractions, explanations and he didn't turn to it. Moped. Sat. Despaired. Restless for the unlived life. He had a series of taboos which served to construct the tedium. If he wrote too much then he would have dried up the next day. So he couldn't write morning, noon and night. And if he wrote too much the freshness went, the critical intensity, and he was afraid he would start to let things by that were unsatisfactory, that the writing would become ramshackle. It was not an irrational taboo. It was based on learned experience and observation, on having tried to push up his word limits, to find he ended up seizing up, stopping altogether. He accepted it as his burden, filling in the remainder of the time after the brief moments of writing. It could be laziness, he worried endlessly about that, lying back in his chair, indolent, inert. And reading, this other taboo was that he did not like to read when writing in case the manner, the vision, the content, leaked in and confused his own project, too open to immediate influence, influence that needed to be absorbed and digested and distance. Maybe it applied only to reading fiction. Biography, history, criticism, theory, maybe he could read them. He tried. He cruised around and found no one to visit and drove back home to read, to try and know, to be responsible, but he found that a great tedium too.

Balmy Balmain days, his father always used to say balmy, balm of Gilead, pronouncing the l as he did in palm tree, one of the traces of the Midlands they were told to prune away by the missionaries of standard-speak, necessary for upward mobility, but balmy days suggested a degree of tranquillity, after some rough times. The lead drenched air had the softness of balm, the soap factories belching out their scented soap vomit into the air above the coal loader showering the find dark dust that the balmy breezes carried across the harbour, there was a torpor in these balmy days, low energy, mutation to another species that like robots and computers will be able to live without oxygen in outer space and carry on humanity's grand design there, pall

bearers of the future. These were the balmy days when he would have played sad songs if the record player had been working, nobody calls on the telephone, there is a gas shortage but who cares, there is nowhere to go, the car just rusts there in the street. He wanted to emerge from these dark chrysalis days with gaudy new resplendent wings and flutter them.

Somehow it was all wrong.

'What are we doing here ?' said Sam.

They looked around. The clinical, cynical, cut-price university buildings, the unfocussed lounge or assembly area or whatever it was, the trestle-table of books like a bring and buy sale for church funds. Give us your old, your torn, your unwanted.

'It's a venue,' said Graham. 'It's where we get asked to read. At least they still ask us here.'

'We're slipping,' said Sam.

Where was the glamour of the international writers' festivals ? They had been sceptical of it. Now they had its absence.

'This was a mistake,' said Sam.

'We've got to do something,' said Graham. 'We can't just sit at home doing nothing.'

'I never thought I'd hear you say that,' said Sam. 'I think you were right when you used to say we should just stay home. Never get drunk outside your own house. I never believed it at the time. But now –'

No gesture. They hardly even looked around them. It was a reception cum book launch combined with a reading. Nothing was itself any more. Everything was simultaneously presented as the other since nothing was believed in and two or three functions without belief or meaning could be taken as propping each other up. They didn't. The emptiness seeped from one to another, they dragged each other down. There were never enough drinks. The wine was always cheap and vile. The chemical life. Books were never given away. A launch was no longer a promotion but a garage sale.

And then their publisher, click click click, going round photographing his guests.

'He's a maniac,' said Sam. 'Why doesn't he just publish the books. If he spent as much time as he spends taking photographs on getting the books out you wouldn't mind.'

'You wouldn't mind as much, maybe,' said Graham.

They turned away, keeping their backs to the camera.

'What does he do with all these photographs ? You never see them. He never gives you a print. He never puts them on the books. He never uses them in advertisements.'

'He never advertises,' said Graham.

'He advertises some books,' said Sam. 'You ask him why he doesn't advertise your books and he says advertising doesn't sell books and then he goes and advertises somebody else's book.'

'He doesn't like selling books anyway,' said Graham. 'He prefers to keep them packed up in boxes in the warehouse. It's like selling flesh from his own heart when he has to sell a book.'

'Maybe he just says he'll publish books so he can have a book launch and photograph people,' said Sam.

'But what's he do with the photographs ?'

'One day they'll turn up. One day there'll be a photograph of you with someone you didn't want to be photographed with across the front page of the paper. Or it'll be your face stock onto somebody else holding a gun and that'll be the evidence against you.'

The idea was unappealing.

The colonel turned up. The colonel who had worked with some secret service or other behind enemy lines. It had to be the colonel standing there, talking about closed markets and retail price maintenance and discounting, when the publisher closed in.

'Don't,' said Sam.

'Don't,' said Graham, 'I've told you before.'

The publisher photographed them regardless. Graham threw his beer over the camera. Some overshot and went over the publisher.

It didn't go silent all over the room but it went very quiet in their immediate vicinity.'

'What did you do that for ?' said the publisher.

'I told you not to take a photograph.'

'You've ruined a perfectly good camera. You could have said.'

'I did.'

'He did,' agreed Sam.

The publisher went away to wipe off the beer. The colonel waited to continue, impassive, unperturbed, daily life in the Balkans. 'The thing about retail price maintenance,' he said.

Lily came up. 'What happened ?'

And Sara. 'What happened ?'

'Nothing,' said Sam.

But it had. Another bad idea. The paparazzo's vision of how to deal with paparazzi. Make a good picture. Indelibly printed on the memories of all the arts bureaucrats. And who else ever came to these functions anyway ?

'I think it was a bad idea,' Graham said.

'It was great,' said Sam.

'It was a bad idea, though.'

'He asked for it.'

'I did warn him,' said Graham.

'I don't know whether he heard.'

'I've told him before.'

'He could have forgotten,' said Sam. 'He seems to forget most things.'

'But he must have known.'

'He does now,' said Sam.

'It's just going to be one more example of –'

But he couldn't formulate it. Or rather he could, but every formulation was too unmistakable.

'They'll remember it,' said Sam.

'If he'd just get my book out,' said Graham.

'Hasn't he got it out yet ?'

'He probably never will now.'

'Probably not.'

'It's been nearly three years.'

'That's pretty good,' said Sam. 'Sometimes it's seven.'

'If it hadn't been for that as well,' said Graham, 'if he'd just get the books out you might put up with everything else.'

'What are you going to do now ?' said Sam. 'Give it to somebody else. ?

'There isn't anybody else. He's the last one. I've alienated all the others. They reduce you to a state of desperation and then they provoke you and you just snap.'

'That's what they do in gaol,' said Sam. 'Then you lose your remission.'

'The whole society's run like a gaol.'

'Of course,' said Sam, 'except that it's worse actually in gaol.'

So the occasion came to its genteel end. And a thousand and one others. Out in the car park. Finito. Such gentility. Sara has done her best, yelling at the publisher's

henchman for pestering her, 'Keep your greasy eyes off me,' she says, 'sexist pig,' she adds, for the military chic she wears, khaki overalls or Viet Cong black, the knife in the back paratrooper gear, maybe she doesn't want to be photographed, maybe she doesn't mind being photographed but doesn't want to be pestered. She would spray out a haze of pesticide like a cuttlefish if she could. Maybe that hastened the end. Out into the car park.

'I've got some cans in the car,' says Sam.

'He's got some cans in the car,' jeers Sara, 'what else is new ?'

Sam has prised open the door and got out a can and his incisors have latched onto and punctured it and he's happy now, hooked into his mother's milk, and access to a box of more of the same, the six-pack security blanket, the two dozen off the pallet carton, 2 doz. x 350 ml. aluminium bullets, instant relief.

'I'll get in and roll a smoke,' Graham said.

But the car park was all a bit public, arts bureaucrats coming and going, talking of David Hockney.

They decided to drive down to Centennial Park and have a smoke but then they decided that might be a bit unwise, anyway it was probably locked, and then they decided, why didn't they go and park outside the bungalow of the great man of letters, the national treasure, that would be safe, if they parked the other side of the road, surely if the cops picked them up there it would be the fates, the sport of the muses, the mythical absurdity was surely their insurance. So they rolled a smoke in the protection of the home of the great panjandrum, Casa Blanca, the White House.

'It's like sanctuary,' said Sam.

''Sbetter,' said Graham.

They rolled another one and smoked it too. And one more. Much better.

A figure appeared outside the bungalow. The place seemed to be floodlit. They couldn't remember if it was like that when they pulled up. The figure descended the flights of steps, came up to the front fence, stood there.

'It's the car,' said Sam. 'It's a hire car and it's freaking them out, it looks like a police car.'

'No it doesn't,' said Lily, 'it looks like a hire car.'

'Yes, that's what I mean,' said Sam, 'like a hire car.'

It had Queensland plates, the sunshine state, glowing there like a little ufo exuding brief bursts of vapour beneath the great fig trees. Sam hired it to deliver copies of his poems round the shops, the back is full of boxes of his new book, it is printed on recycled paper made by monks and bound in parchment made from wood-free human flesh, pig skin, pork crackling, and the paper has the creamy texture of pigs' fat liquefied, ice cream, and the four colour cover has been celloglazed to bring

out the depth, and each poem too, so to hire a car to distribute this already phenomenally expensive production, if Sam can be believed, which generally is in doubt, is hardly to add too much to the already impossible bill, so any computation that the cost of the car hire far exceeds anything he can hope to gross let alone net on selling books, his book, this book, is supremely irrelevant. 'I'll just keep it till they take it back,' he says.

'What's happening, what's he doing ?' says Sara.

'I don't know,' says Sam.

'What are you going to do ?'

There is the snap and hiss of a beer can being opened.

'I don't know,' he says.

'We can't just sit here,' says Sara.

'I don't know,' says Graham.

'What if they call the police ?' Sara shrieks.

'That's a point,' says Sam.

'I thought you said they thought we were the police,' says Lily.

'That's another point,' he agrees.

'Go and speak to him,' says Sara.

'I don't know about that,' says Sam.

'Is it him ?' she says.

No, it's not him, the face of a thousand photo calls.

'Who is it ?'

'Someone else.'

'Who ?'

'Go and ask him,' suggest Sam.

'We can't just sit here,' says Sara.

'I know,' says Sam, an idea, 'I'll give him a book.'

'A book,' says Sara. 'Just what he's been waiting for. What an original idea. Why don't you give him a whole box of books ? We've got enough.'

'I wonder should I sign it.'

'We'll all sign it,' says Sara.

'No, this is serious,' says Sam. He sifts through his pockets looking for a pen.

He hasn't got one.

'How can I sign it without a pen ?' he asks.

'Here, use this hairpin and write it in blood,' says Sara.

She prods him with the hairpin.

'Sara,' says Sam.

Prod, prod.

'His skin's so thick you can't draw blood.'

'You've managed,' says Sam.

She keeps prodding him till he gets out of the car.

'Take a book,' she says.

He opens the door to get the keys from the ignition to open the boot. Sara prods him some more.

'Fuckin' lay off,' says Sam.

'"Fuckin' lay off,"' says Sara. 'The poet speaks.'

He gets a book and turns toward the white paling fence.

'Isn't anyone coming with me ?' he asks.

'No.'

'Why are you so nervous all of a sudden ?' says Sam.

'The anxiety of influence,' says Graham.

'Aren't you coming ?' says Sam.

'You're on your own, poet,' says Sara.

'We might frighten him off if we all go,' says Lily.

'Then you'll have to leave your book on the doorstep,' says Sara, 'and the dogs will piss all over it.'

'Like critics,' says Graham.

They sat in the car beneath the fig trees and watched Sam bear his gift across the road. The book is handed over. It is looked at, at arms' length. There are nods, bows. Sam ruffles a hand through his hair. He returns. The figure still stands at the white fence, book held in front of him in both hands, like a sporran. Tribute paid.

'Brave boy,' says Sara. 'One less to sell.'

Sam gets back into the car.

Sara prods him.

'Drive,' she said.

Sam phoned.

'Sara's in gaol,' he said.

'Still competing with you ?' said Graham.

Sam growled.

'How come you're not ?'

'That's just it,' said Sam. 'They were arresting me and she got mad and kicked one of the police so they let me go and grabbed her. Interfering with a police officer and resisting arrest.'

'So they arrested her for resisting arrest ?'

'They always do,' said Sam. 'That's always the first thing they arrest you for.'

'It could be serious,' said Graham.

'It's worse than that,' said Sam. 'Her mother went and bailed her out and now she's left me. Her mother won't let her out of the house. They won't let me talk to her. I phone up and they just say no. In fact they don't even say no. They just hang up. I was amazed when you actually answered.'

Outside the morning danced as ever on the harbour.

'She just went animal,' said Sam. 'I was visiting this girl. She wanted to talk about poetry. You know how they do. But she wanted to talk about it at her place. So I took some books and records and went across. It was only across the road. Then Sara came back and went animal. She started kicking the door in. And the girl went all weird and wouldn't let her in. She put all the catches on the door and locked herself in the shower. I kept trying to explain the door was locked and I couldn't get out.'

'Just fucking climb out,' Sara said.

'How can I climb out ? There isn't a chimney.'

'Climb out the window,' Sara shouted.

'Sara, it's three floors up.'

'Then jump,' she said.

'I can't jump three stories.'

'Then phone the fire brigade and get them to get you out.'

'Why the fire brigade ?'

'Then you can climb down a ladder. They're used to catching tom cats.'

'I hate ladders.'

'Then jump.'

'I can't jump three stories.'

'They'll have a blanket.'

'Who will ?'

'The fire brigade,' she said.

'How can I call the fire brigade ? There isn't a fire.'

'I'll start one,' she said.

'That's when the neighbours called the cops,' said Sam. 'Then they broke in. And this girl just locked herself in the bathroom. They came at the door wham, bam, and suddenly there's these two huge policemen dragging me out. "There's no need to drag me," I said, "I'd have come before but the door was locked. It was a deadlock." That's when they punched me. You never talk to cops. You just let them write it down and

you sign it. They hate you talking to them. So I was just lying on the ground and Sara got mad and kicked one of them and that's when they arrested her. They just left me lying there and dragged her off. I couldn't go after her because I'd been drinking. I'd have lost my licence.'

'I thought you already had lost your licence.'

'Yes, that's right, I did, they'd have got me for driving without a licence. Anyway we didn't have any money so I couldn't have bailed her out. So her mother did and now she's got her locked up there. She'd have been better off in gaol. I've been to gaol and I've been to her mother's and I tell you which I'd prefer. I'd prefer gaol. Anyway, what I thought was, if you're not busy or anything, you could drive me over there. Then if it turns nasty or anything, we can just leave. What do you reckon?'

The sun shone equally over the city. It bounced the same off all the reaches of the harbour, whether off coal wharves or gum trees. Inside Sara's mother's house it was filtered out. An English chill pervaded. Home counties chintz. Or whatever they have in the home counties. And round the wall portraits of Sara, photographs, oils, surreal extravaganzas.

'What have you done to my daughter ?' Sara's mother asks.

'Hi, ma,' says Sam, 'how's things ?'

'What have you done to my poor child ?'

'What have I done ?' says Sam, 'I haven't done anything.'

Sara appears. She smiles graciously in the doorway.

'Sara,' says Sam.

'You sent her to gaol, my poor little lamb.'

'I didn't send her to gaol,' says Sam, 'the police sent her to gaol.'

'You let them take me away,' says Sara.

'What do you expect me to do,' says Sam, 'fight the police ?'

'I fought them for you,' says Sara.

'I know,' says Sam, 'that's why they put you in gaol.'

'Why couldn't you fight them ?'

'They don't like people fighting them. They'd just have put me in gaol too and how would that have helped ?'

'You didn't even bail me out '

'We don't have any money.'

'You could have got money,' says Sara, 'I would have got money if you'd been in gaol.'

'How would you have got money ?' says Sam.

'I would have stolen it.'

'Then they'd have put you in gaol.'

'I'd have sold myself.'

'Oh,' her mother howls, 'see what you've done to my daughter, you've driven my daughter onto the streets.'

'I haven't driven your daughter onto the streets,' says Sam, 'or anywhere else. I don't even have a driver's licence.'

'And now she's in gaol.'

'No she isn't,' says Sam, 'she's right here.'

'No thanks to you,' said Sara. 'If it had been left to you I'd have still been in there.'

'I had to bail her out,' said her mother, 'I had to drive out in the early hours of the morning and wait at the gaol gates. Oh my poor darling, what has he done to you?'

'I haven't done anything.' said Sam.

'It's because of you she's in gaol,' said her mother.

'She was only there overnight, for heaven's sake,' said Sam. 'I was in there ten years.'

'You're used to it,' said her mother. 'That's how you grew up. But my poor, poor, poor little girl, how could they do that to you ?'

Sam reeled. 'You're used to it,' he repeated to himself, 'you're used to it.'

'It's where you belong,' said her mother. 'Out, out, out of my house, before I call the police.'

'Bye bye, Graham,' Sara smiled pleasantly.

Her mother picked up the phone and began to dial.

'Out, out,' she said, pointing at the door, 'before I call the police to put you back where you belong.'

Out, out they went.

Sam phoned.

'Sara's gone,' he said.

'Sara's gone,' Graham repeated, on the principle of if you don't know what reaction is expected, best just repeat the statement.

'She's taken everything,' said Sam. 'Everything. The house is empty. I'm going mad with the emptiness. Why don't you come over ? Visit the abyss.'

The door was open as an emblem of emptiness and Sam sat inside on the floor. The room was very empty. There were no chairs, no couches. There was none

of the usual clutter of tables and magazines and records. There were no carpets. Sam sat on the bare boards beside the phone, trying to remember numbers to dial.

'She even took the phone books,' he said.

A couple of empty beer bottles lay against the skirting board.

'There's not even a drink left,' he said. 'There's not even a fridge to put a drink in. Imagine. She even took the fridge. That's pretty final.

'I can't even play any music,' he said, 'she took the record player.

'She even took my teeth,' he said. 'She did. She threw my teeth out of the window and jumped on my glasses. If I'd had a wooden leg she'd have taken that.'

He lisped, peered, sans teeth, sans eyes.

'There isn't even a bed,' he said. '"You can screw your girl-friends on the floor," she said, "and I hope they get splinters up their arse."'

'Did they ?" Graham asked.

Sam growled. 'Can you imagine any girl coming in here like this?'

'Depends how much they wanted to talk about poetry ?' said Graham.

'This is ridiculous,' said Sam. 'Even in gaol they give you something to sit on. They give you a bed. I can't spend the rest of my life sitting on the floor ?'

'How did she shift it all ?'

'She got these guys. In football socks. Great heavy animals. I was asleep and suddenly they're marching in and out taking all the furniture. Then they took the bed and that was it. She and her mother organised it. They were out there like field-marshals. Standing on the footpath giving orders. I went to the pub. I couldn't believe it. When I came back there was nothing left. It was like a haunted house with all the ghosts taken away. It was like a vacuum. I looked in and I thought, if I go in there I'll drop down dead from lack of oxygen. That's why I've kept the door open. Otherwise there's nothing in here, no air, nothing. If you could take a vacuum she'd have taken that away too. But some things you can't take away. Not even Sara.'

Two performance poets arrived. Sam had been on the phone. Dial a poem. Dial a poet. Dial two poets.

'We responded to your call for help.'

'I didn't call for help,' said Sam. 'There's no help possible. I'm helpless. I called for company.'

'Well, we've brought you company.'

'Did you bring anything to drink ?' said Sam.

They looked at each other, post-modernist self reflexion.

'You didn't say you wanted something to drink.'

Content free.

'He always wants something to drink,' said Graham.

'Of course I want a drink,' said Sam. 'Wouldn't you ? What sort of poets are you ?'

'Go across to the bottle shop,' said one of them.

'I don't have a fridge. How can I drink warm beer ?'

'Just buy one bottle at a time.'

'I don't have any money,' said Sam, 'how can I buy anything ?'

'I don't have any money on me,' said the first performance poet.

'We drove straight over,' said the other.

'Great,' said Sam.

'We drove across the city.'

'Incredible,' said Sam. 'All the way from Bondi.'

'Yes.'

'They drove all the way from Bondi and they didn't even pick up a drink.'

'The bottle shop's shut now, anyway.'

'Somewhere will be open,' said Sam.

'We don't have any money.'

'Do a smash and grab,' said Sam.

They refused.

'Call yourselves performance poets and you won't even do a smash and grab,' said Sam. 'What sort of performance is that ?'

'I might have a bottle in the car,' said the first performance poet.

He came back with a bottle.

Sam eyed it.

'Anyone got a bottle opener ?'

'She took everything,' said Sam. 'Especially bottle openers. She packed them first. Personally.'

'We could break the neck off,' said the second performance poet.

'I'll do it with my teeth,' said Sam.

'You haven't got any teeth,' said Graham.

'I'll do it with my gums,' said Sam. 'Pass it across.'

They passed it across, reluctantly.

'It's warm,' said Sam. 'The bottle's warm. How can we drink warm beer ?'

He twisted at the top with his hand and the cap came loose. Beer spurted up in a soupy, stained froth. Sam directed it into his mouth.

'You had a bumpy ride from Bondi,' said Graham.

'I'll get a glass,' said the first performance poet.

'She took them all. I keep telling you she took everything and you won't believe me. Especially the glasses.'

'She hand-packed them,' said Graham.

'No she didn't, her mother did.'

The first performance poet wiped the bottle top and rim and neck as Sam passed it to him, took a token sip and passed it on to the second. The second took a swig. Graham declined. Sam finished it off.

'Now what ?'

'I'm making a series of films on poets,' said the first performance poet.

He gave up waiting for Sam to ask what he was doing and let it bubble out like an advertisement for champagne by a fêted artist.

'Blood of a poet,' said Sam. 'You should have got Sara to help you make it. Or her mother.'

'No, these would be documentary films.'

'Death of a poet,' said Sam.

'Snuff movies,' said the second performance poet. He quivered with delectation.

'I'm making one on Les and one on the Egg and then if there's enough money left I can make one on you.'

'Dead poets' society,' said Sam.

'Why don't you make one on Sam first and then if there's enough money left do one on the others,' said Graham.

'Yeah,' said Sam.

'No, it's got to be this way.'

'Have they told you ?' said Sam. 'Did you sell your soul ?'

'No, I've got a completely free hand. I insisted on having that.'

'Well be free,' said Sam. 'Choose freedom.'

'I've already started work on the first, it's in pre-production.'

'Where's pre-production ?' asked Sam.

'It's where he spends his life,' said Graham.

'I think that's offensive,' said the performance poet.

'It's pretty offensive saying you're making all these documentaries and you'll do Sam if there's anything left over.'

'There's nothing offensive about that.'

'And there'll be nothing left over.'

'You're fucked,' said the first performance poet. He walked out. 'I've always thought you were fucked and you are fucked.'

The second performance poet got up and followed. 'I need the lift,' he said.

'Yeah, I bet you do,' said Sam. 'Don't forget your bottle.'

He threw the bottle across. The second performance poet caught it.

'Tell him he can have what's left,' said Sam.

They heard the car revving up, shunting backwards and forwards to escape where it had been parked in.

'He didn't even deliver a curse,' said Sam. 'He just said "You're fucked" and walked out. What sort of poet's that ? I thought he was supposed to be a poet.'

'He's been infected by a video virus,' said Graham.

'We won't be,' said Sam. 'At least you've made sure of that. Good one, Graham. Now you've guaranteed there won't be any money left to make a film on me.'

'It'll save you dying from exposure,' said Graham.

'He's right,' said Sam. 'You're fucked.'

14. CONFERENCE

A conference in the United States filled Graham with foreboding. Nothing good could come out of it. But nothing good could come out of not going. It was the only game in town. Significant absence had no role in the promotion of contemporary cultural production. You were either there or you didn't exist. Not that being there was any guarantee of favours or successes. Being there presented you with another agenda of traps and hazards. The land of trick or treat.

So it couldn't be said he went there the dumb or wide-eyed innocent. The days of innocence were passed and too painful to write about. The dull suffusion of embarrassment he could do without; he certainly had no intention of voluntarily inducing it. Now it was all duplicity and control, evasion and entrapment, now it all stank, the decay of a system that refused to die, that reinvigorated itself with the blood of the other, other peoples, other races, other nations, infecting them with its own disease as it sucked at their throat.

This was really not the state of mind to set off in. Yet to have set off in any other state of mind would have been foolhardy, fatally naive. Even with this package of distaste and contempt and trepidation he knew well enough he would make yet another set of errors, fall into some all too obvious in hindsight pitfall, drink at some blatantly poisoned chalice, breathe in some contaminated air or noxious gas, finger some poisoned book, embrace some agency of evil. It was ever so, every time. Forewarned, forearmed and yet every time fucked over. Even the cat miaowed in an anxious way as he thought about it, perceiving invisible psychic presences of indubitable evil.

It was all to take place at one of those peculiarly American institutions, a campus town, situated safely away from all other habitation, a quarantine station for imported intellectuals, a germ warfare research laboratory, an explosives factory. If anything got out of control it wouldn't immediately affect the population at large. True, the winds might blow the contaminated air across the great plains and deposit something or other somewhere else. Or the effluent might leak into the water table and cause birth defects down the line. But then nobody's perfect. They had made it as remote and inconvenient as possible, and preferred access was by a fragile commuter aircraft with just one row of passengers along each side, and a captain who opened the door and smiled at them as he looked down the narrow length of the fuselage, all red lips and sharp looking teeth, white as bones in that peculiarly American orthodontically obsessed way.

And then they were up and off. The dead travel fast. It was a terrifying flight in such a tiny craft, tossed around in the turbulence, and then it seemed they were simply going over and over the same ground again, banking round in a wide circle waiting to land, dim blue lights emerging and vanishing through the cloud. At some point he fell asleep with that merciful paralysis of air travel, too traumatized to register the experience, that spreading coma of non-reaction to the daily horror of non-existence.

On the ground, and he almost kissed it like the Pope so glad he was to touch it again, would you believe it, American ground, on the ground he and other shaken conference fodder were met by a limousine and whisked away through the night. More ups and downs and wraiths of mist and blue neon signs exhorting consume, consume, consume, and the blood-curdling howls of wolves in the moonlight from the illuminated football-fields and there they were, campus-town, deposited before the studded oak door of an extraordinary, unbelievable menacing manor-house, the creaking sign swinging in the wind proclaiming Glamis Castle Hotel Motel Inn and Country Club.

'Have a nice day,' smiled the receptionist, bombed out on some truth reducing happy drug, eyes pin points of Aryan blue, teeth full and white and straight and sharp.

He survived the night. No mysterious visitors that he noticed. No rapping at the window pane, no unwrapping the complementary chocolate beside the bed, spiked with who knew what ? How many people had been invited to conferences in America and never returned ? He had no figure for it. Not something you read about. But somewhere he held this anxiety. Someone whose work he had read had been found there, dead, their arteries slit in the bath on a visit. Or mysteriously mugged. There was Dylan Thomas of course. He left the minibar alone too. And Phar Lap.

He was in the hotel lobby and had just met his minder who was to take him somewhere when she arrived, all white teeth and red lipstick and white trenchcoat and red scarf. But it wasn't the ritual colours of the assassins that he registered, it was the making an entrance. Some people slip round doors unobtrusively, self-effacingly, trip even, are held squashed, luggage in each hand. Not her. She had a couple of males trotting along beside, carrying her baggage as well as their own, she strode in free, holding forth to them in full North American literary monologue. You should register these initial impressions of bad news, record them, act on them. But he time and again filed them as messages received and ignored them, these spontaneous impressions gleaned before the baleful eyes were beamed full at him, after which he repressed and denied and forgot.

And insofar as you never quite forget, you are never sure anyway whether an initial impression is simply an impression, a strong impact registered, but the positive or negative marker immaterial, the impression confounded with your own prejudices which constantly need guarding against, even reassessing, aware of your all too ready irrational spontaneity, how can you be sure you feel what you feel ? That is why, of course, the feeling before you feel anything has the purity of ignorance, uncontaminated by observation. And about that you wonder, sometimes it seems likely to be truer, sometimes not. Are your spontaneous defences sound, or do they need to be guarded against, are they defences protecting you or imprisoning you ?

His focus anyway was on his minder at that point. Is that what he was, this bearded, balding, bundle of bonhomie ? These conferences where they deployed an honours student or a graduate student to attend your needs, what were they about ? What needs were admitted ? Were they there to find you sex or dope ? To provide them ? To prevent them ? To take you wherever you cared to go ? Or to make sure you went nowhere that was not intended ? They were convenient, they not only showed you how to get from spot to spot, they also transported you there. And if they were making sure there was nowhere else you went, what could these somewhere elses ever have been where you might unattended have found yourself ?

Either you were looked after in this way that made you wonder if you were under guard, or you were left totally alone, lost, adrift, never getting to meet anyone or see anything. And those conferences where you were totally abandoned to yourself, didn't you sometimes suspect that the people you never got to meet, the people you might have liked to have met, were safely under guard somewhere else, that there was an impenetrable fence rigged up emanating so strong a negative force that you never got near enough to see it let alone suspect there was anything hidden beyond it, which was not for you, until afterwards.

'Francesca Templar,' said the minding graduate.

'Ah yes,' he said.

'The novelist.'

'I can't say I've actually read her.'

'She's up there.'

'Have you read anything ?'

'I've got her latest beside the bed,' said the graduate.

After she'd registered and made her safari to the lifts and stowed everything and everyone in, and vanished, the minder asked, 'Well, are we ready ?'

'Sure,' said Graham, 'as ready as ever.'

Who had been waiting for whom ? They could have spent all morning sitting there.

The minder took him off somewhere. Some hut, some suite of rooms. Visit the centre. It was like so many of these centres: the mixture of the well connected, of lines into power, and of the peripheral, the marginalized assistants on short contracts, overqualified for what their positions were, but with no tenure, no security, that new class of the wandering, here today, South East Asia or the Balkans tomorrow.

The director was clearly plugged into power. He acknowledged them abstractedly. Graham felt no warmth. But they exchanged credentials: I was in your country nine months ago, I shall be returning next fall, that sort of thing. He had just got in from Washington, was preparing to go off somewhere else, the conference was just a blip on his eternal circuit.

The minder took him off for lunch. 'Someone who admires your work.' Again more exchange of politenesses. They ate in some imitation bar, Irish or L. A. Tudor.

'Not like the old Forth and Clyde,' said the minder.

'No,' said Graham, quite happy it wasn't like that scene of so many wasted hours, drunken bondings, sober betrayals.

'Or the London.'

'No,' he agreed again, same sense of relief.

'They were good bars,' said the minder, elaborating his own response in Graham's abstraction. 'Grand days.'

'Up to a point,' agreed Graham.

'I remember you down there.'

'Really ?' said Graham. He looked at the minder again. He looked disturbingly like Mel the part-time dealer and, he suspected, indeed had no doubt, full-time informer, special branch or some other security service.

'I can't remember,' said Graham.

'You were generally pretty out of it.'

'Could be,' he conceded, 'just could be.'

Ah, the happy oblivion, when you just got drunk or stoned and had no fear.

'Are they still raging on down there ?'

'I honestly don't know. I've not been to them for years.'

The minder went into a reminiscence of the good old wasted days, the endless afternoons on the footpath in the sun, the endless parties after the pubs shut.

'How long were you there ?' Graham asked.

'I was there two years.'

'Doing what ?'

'Oh, this and that. Bumming around. Officially I was doing an MA.'

'In what ?'

'Politics. But I got hooked on the literature. I audited some literature courses. I used to go to readings you guys organised. They were some great old times those readings. Booze. Dope. Punch ups. I never knew literature was so full on. I even thought of transferring but it was too difficult with the scholarship.'

He smiled at Graham.

'What do you reckon for the reading tonight ?'

The reading was at the director's house.

'Don't you find that insulting ?' said Francesca Templar. 'Don't you think we should have a proper session ? This is like bringing the darkies in off the plantation to sing spirituals through dinner. How can you read while people are eating and drinking and talking ?'

'Used to it,' said Graham.

'Well I'm not.'

'We used to do a lot of open air readings on the harbour, and pub readings,' Graham said. 'So there was always a hubbub going on in the background.'

'When I read I expect people to listen,' she said.

'Well, yes,' said Graham, 'I know what you mean.'

'I feel it's totally inappropriate,' she said.

And it was really, standing on the staircase to gain a bit of height, to be seen if not heard, in one room anyway, a dull mumbling of conversation and eating punctuated by mirth going on in the other rooms, and the little sniffer dog galloping around and ducking under chairs and sniffing at audience and readers alike. And uncomfortable, everyone having to stand to listen, except a few distinguished elderly who were given chairs.

Graham stood there with Zac, his minder, he'd managed to memorise his name by now.

'Don't you think she's like Valda ? Isn't she just like Valda ?' said Zac.

'Valda was a better writer,' said Graham.

'No, but just to look at.'

'Valda was a better writer than any of them,' said Graham, focussing his unease, his sense of being an alien in enemy territory, projecting it into a memory of Valda who had always felt like that, in any literary or quasi-literary gathering. He looked round for another drink to loosen up, liberate his emotions, slide into pity, his

own coded self-pity. Valda who'd become so difficult not even her friends wanted to know where she was any more, no one enquired for fear of discovering her, and the publishing world had abandoned her years before, Valda who'd represented a free spirit, of life and writing, the future that they'd aimed for. And now he'd ended up at this, yapping dogs, ex-consuls, academic consultants to government agencies, cultural prefects, complicit fuckwits.

'Don't you think she's like Valda ?'

'Not really.'

'She was something, Valda.'

'When did you know her ?' asked Graham.

'Oh, down the Forth and Clyde and the London,' said Zac.

Valda of all people, Valda, the excluded, the expunged, the erased. And that here of all places, whatever and wherever it was, someone should be talking of her, to Graham who'd loved her and lived with her and indeed written about her. How amazing. What a coincidence. What happy chance. What forethought. What planning. What research.

It wasn't a bad reading. Francesca read quite well. And it was sort of sexy. That surprised him because for all the fluffed out hair and the blood red lipstick the set of her face didn't suggest that at all. She was a householder, not a street person like Valda. And the sexiness was all voile and veils, all flurries and deceits and innuendoes, sex in the head, a frisson of images, sly, suggestive, flowery, polleny, all a bit dusty and sticky and provoking an allergic reaction, no, perhaps that wasn't fair, but she wasn't like Valda for all Zac's insisting she was.

So they all did their bit. One old buffer liked Graham's reading, an ex-consul or ex-cultural affairs officer who'd been posted to Australia at the time of the CIA coup, such a genial good old boy, something in Graham's piece about biplanes triggered off happy memories of learning to fly before world war two, practicing for special missions, the thrill of the wind through the wires, the goggles, the leather helmet, the cyanide capsule, the sealed orders, the days behind the enemy lines. Graham could empathise with the last bit. They shared bonhomie amidst the cheesecake and mud pie.

Then Francesca Templar descended and she and Graham congratulated each other on their fine readings and carefully honed prose and the practised assurance of their delivery.

'I still think it's a disgrace,' she said, 'even though it went off well that's no thanks to the organisers. How can you read properly in conditions like this ?'

'You managed,' he said.

'It's not good enough all the same,' she said.

Her little sharp teeth glistened. She beamed her full attention on him. At least you could say that about her, she wasn't one of those people always looking around or over your shoulder when she talked to you. When she talked to you she impaled you with the fixity of her gaze. It could be flattering, such attention, such intent. Like a pin through the body of a butterfly, and the fluttering wings were not hers, eyelashes and veils and come hither complicity, but your own death throes.

'I need some air,' she said, 'do you feel like a walk ?'

'A walk ?' said Graham.

'It's so crowded and stuffy in here,' she said. 'I'd like to get some fresh air and see the stars.'

'Is it safe ?' he said. 'Can you just walk around safely at night here ?'

He took another swig at his beer. Now he'd negotiated the reading bit he felt like getting drunk. He didn't have to drive anywhere. Zac was surely detailed to get him home. A romantic walk in a crisp moonlit night: it didn't appeal. Besides, they might get lost. Alarm the hosts. Create an incident. This was only the opening day of the conference.

She went off, exited. It seemed like madness. What sort of invitation was it ? He was wary enough, on the first day anyway, of invitations, and he wasn't even sure that this was one, and he was too warm and comfortable and relieved after doing the reading to cope with ambiguity.

He rejoined the ex-consul or ex-cultural affairs attaché and the other good old boys as they discussed the Falklands war.

After the party they went onto a bar. The writers. The poets. The ragers. They had a reputation to keep up. Francesca was doubtful.

'I think I might just go back to the hotel.'

'You can't do that,' said Graham.

'Absolutely prohibited,' said the poet Prickett.

'Come and have a drink with the boys,' said Zac.

They stood in the frosty night arguing about it.

'I don't want to be late,' she said.

'Scouts' honour,' said the poet Prickett. 'Get you back before dawn.'

So they drove around in Zac's car, looking for a bar. They found one looking fierce and primitive, a wooden shed with a neon sign. Francesca was dubious but Zac assured them it was safe, and they went in, all noise and music, and sat down at a

rough log table. There was the usual milling around and shuffling for a place, choices and avoidances, don't want to be next to him but want to rub up against her. Who knew how these things were arranged or achieved ? Francesca was between Graham and the poet. Zac was across from them, holding them all in his wide-faced gaze, flanked by more writers or graduate students or whatever they were.

These are the late night confessionals where you trade truths, devise intimacies, brush arms and legs, years ago the room would have been smoke-filled but that is no longer allowed, years ago there would have been dope smoke too but that isn't allowed either, so just phrases, scraps of data gleaned from research and the books pages, flatteries, shared enemies, meaningful glances, draught beer.

Graham sat quietly in the morning session, minding his own business, at the back of the room so he could make a quiet exit if it all got too much, or too little. It wasn't that he expected to make an exit; but knowing he was near a door made the tedium tolerable. And he still felt that if you were on a conference programme you should attend the other sessions and not just swan in and out for your own. So he sat there, got a coffee in the break between sessions, exchanged pleasantries, sat there again for the next paper.

This was where Francesca found him, coming in late in her dark glasses, surveying the hall, picking him off at the edge of the herd, ruminating there unaware, unalert, zap, the teeth into the jugular, and hardly a resistance, a tired convulsive twitch, not even surprise.

'How are you this morning ?' she asked, husky from high living or the low bar.

He held up his all but empty plastic handle-less cup of coffee, symbol, slogan, indicator.

She grabbed it from his hand.

'Milk ? Sugar ?' she asked.

He nodded and she went over to the coffee jug and filled up his cup and another one for herself.

Ah, the pleasures of being cosseted, the mid-morning potion to revive the corpse, delivered to your chair.

'Who's this ? What's this ?' she said, sitting on a stacking chair beside him, indicating the speaker. 'Is it good ? Or is it boring ? Sounds boring to me.'

'Well,' he said, trying to remember.

'Or did I wake you up ?' she asked.

She took off her dark glasses before the coffee steamed them up, fixed him with a piercing look, those moments of complicity, ocular intimacy, like the mongoose and the snake.

'Something like that,' he said, whispering, there was after all somebody down the front there trying to deliver a paper.

'Is it worth staying for ? I thought I might go and explore. Do some shopping.'

He tried a shrug, at least that was silent, silent indeterminacy.

But she insisted on speech. She was in north American literary mode, intransigent volubility. And now he'd indicated he wasn't really aware of what the speaker was saying, now he'd failed to indicate a rapt attention and had accepted the coffee, he was locked into her verbal ministrations. Which would undo all the merit he'd hoped to have attained, or at least all the approval for his observable presence, by just being there. Being there and talking through the session was definitely a bad thing to do. It seemed not to worry her. Perhaps she'd been promised immunity, the provocateur's privilege. Perhaps she didn't care and was demonstrating creative art's verbal precedence over mere critical inquiry down the front. Talk the bastards down.

He tried monosyllables. He tried turning away and looking fixedly at the speaker. He nodded, smiled, grimaced, a whole emporium of shop-soiled pre-verbal communication but she wouldn't buy it. It was talk, damn you, talk. And he could either talk there, or suggest they crept outside, tiptoeing out to the corridor. He suggested they crept out. She managed to collide with a chair so everyone turned to see them go. It would've been better if he'd just slept in and stayed in bed and then nobody would have noticed whether he was there or not and he could have had a leisurely decent coffee in a china cup in the hotel and arrived in time to mingle with everyone exiting from the final session and gone off to lunch with them. But now he was sprung. Leapt on, seized, slaughtered, revived, revealed, reviled. And not even dark glasses to hide behind.

Outside in the foyer she smiled her shining sharp toothed smile of complicity.

'Where now ?' she said.

He made some sound of indecision, unpreparedness.

'Or were your thoughts so fixed on escape you hadn't thought any further ?' she asked.

'Pretty much,' he conceded. Or lied.

'We could find somewhere to have a coffee,' she said.

He was awash with the stuff.

They were standing there outside the seminar room when a couple of the organizing committee came in, Poole and Parrott,

'Playing truant ?' said Poole.

'Early start ?' she responded.

Poole smiled his gracious ivy-league smile.

'We had a spot of business to attend to,' he said. He turned to Graham. 'What have the sessions been like ?'

'Good,' said Graham, 'fine.'

'What was on ?'

'Ah,' he said, 'I'm not sure I can remember.' He tried, but he couldn't, it was all a blank already.

'We were thinking of finding somewhere to have a coffee,' said Francesca. 'Is there anywhere near ?'

Poole looked at his watch.

'Is there a curfew on coffee drinking ?' she asked.

'No, no, coffee's allowed,' he smiled. 'But most places will be getting ready to serve lunch soon.'

'What about an early lunch ?' said Graham.

'There's a man who knows his mind,' said Poole.

Was it ? Was he ? Graham wondered.

So they had their early lunch and it wasn't even a drunken one. They were all so abstemious. But it had the heady excitement of playing truant. The writers escape their hosts. Even if a couple of the hosts were with them, it still played the game of evasion. And in that game you leaned across the table, or leaned to whoever was on one side of you or the other, and whispered confidences, your intimate evaluations of other writers, absent friends.

This was before Francesca Templar had become famous let alone the household name she was clearly prepared for. Looking back, and it was always looking back, Graham found it hard to remember specifically what she had said, who in particular she had defamed. Maybe she didn't defame anybody. Maybe she simply asked the innocent questions. What do you think of A ? Recipes for unnecessary novels. What about B ? Copywriting, not writing. And C ? Frontal lobe epilepsy. And D ? Abuse of office. And E ? International conspiracy. What sort of conspiracy ? There's only one conspiracy. What, CIA ? Mossad ? Something like that, something promoting the safe, occupying the ground, ensuring the rule of whatever you say, say nothing. Isn't that a bit extreme ? No, it's moderate. It's all in the historical records, that's why there's such a move against history.

He wasn't telling them again, was he, how could he, how when the USA promoted abstract expressionist painting to confront socialist realism and European

humanism, the CIA funded the international exhibitions. That wasn't him asking, how could it be, why would it be any different in literature ? And if it worked then, why wouldn't they do the same thing now, and tomorrow ? Wherever there's culture there's the intelligence agencies, who could have been saying that, there over lunch, to such a trusted intimate gathering ?

'What about here ?' said Francesca. 'What about the director, aren't you suspicious of him ?'

Of course he was suspicious of the director, he was suspicious of everybody, including Francesca now she'd raised the question. But now in relation to her it was too late, now he'd raised his flag, blown his trumpeting blast of defiance and the walls stood firm as ever, his attempts at bland geniality passed by unlistened to, his attempts at defusing disregarded, the explosives having gone off already as he brought them out and there he was splashed in fragments round the restaurant walls, displayed, dismembered, exfoliated for easy analysis.

On the way back from lunch one of the conference committee greeted them, a genial wave from across the street. Francesca pursed her lips and turned her head away.

'That dreadful little man,' she said.

'Who is he ?'

'I don't remember his silly name but he edits that pathetic magazine they were trying to sell in the hall.'

'Oh, I know,' said Graham.

'Don't even mention its name,' she said.

'Did they reject you or something ?'

She gave him a frosty look too. 'The hide of them,' she said, 'who do they think they are ? I told him, I've been published by *Granta* and *Harpers* and *New Yorker,* who does he think he is ? Do you know what they had the nerve to write ? Needs more work. Can you imagine ? Pathetic little worm. They have the effrontery to write and ask for a piece and then they respond with the insulting idiocy of that. If *Granta* and *Harpers* and *New Yorker* publish me and pay good money, who does that little worm think he is ? Have you published in there ? Now I suppose you'll say he's a friend of yours.'

'No, he rejected me too,' said Graham. 'But I sent him something very long that no one would touch so I wasn't surprised. I just thought I'd try it on. The trouble is hardly anyone ever sees it except academics.'

'I hope not,' she said. 'I hope it withers on the vine. And that pompous little worm with it.'

At dinner he did get drunk. At dinner he expounded his full analysis. Why would you have an arts council if it wasn't to implement government policy ? What better way to supplement the secret service budget, funnel it through the arts, it was easy to move writers around the world, giving readings, writing travel articles. Journalists were too obvious. Everyone knew journalists worked for the intelligence agencies, they were immediately suspect. But obscure poets, trivial novelists, they could move around at ease and do whatever needed to be done, suborn, entrap, deliver, smuggle out. But that was only one part of it. There was also the work rewarded, doing the state some service, putting in three years of secret work and after that we'll set you up, arrange publication, fix the reviews, provide the eternal pension.

'But how do you know all this ?' she asked.

'You can see it,' he said. 'You can see the pattern. And the beauty of it is its economy. You supplement the secret service budget by putting your agents on literary fellowships and you simultaneously control the cultural world by having those people occupying the space. So nothing subversive ever gets written. Or if it does it never gets published. Or if it gets published it doesn't get reviewed. You ensure that most of your high profile figures are trusties. And they're the ones you give the travel money to, they're the ones you send round the world. That's why the whole culture has died.'

'So who sent you round the world ?'

He should have asked who paid for her but he was so caught up in his own flow that he didn't.

'I got a conference travel grant from the university.'

'And that's different ?'

'It's part of the job.'

'And people who work in universities aren't part of the secret service network?'

'I'm sure they are too,' he agreed.

'It sounds very paranoid,' she said.

He was used to that one.

'It's all about control. Preserving a stable environment for business. You have to give the illusion of free speech, free markets, free world. Literature does that. No more censorship, lots of explicit sex, no taboo topics. It looks like anything goes. And anything does as long as it doesn't shake the fabric of the state. You can't have a system that allows advocacy of its own destruction. But if your system proclaims freedom you can't have explicit controls, they have to be secret, they have to be

structural. You've got to allow the illusion of criticism and dissent, but that has to be a carefully controlled criticism, a safe dissent.'

There was a lot of the shoulder brushing, hand on arm stuff. But he didn't need that. He got off on the material itself, the thrill of the unsayable, the expression of the unexpressed, the sheer beauty of the logic of it, so simple, so obvious, so outrageous, so effective, so impermeable; for the moment. In the end its sheer obsessive totalitarianism must ensure its destruction. He didn't expect to be around to see it; but you never know, such collapses could be very sudden, he reminded himself to live in hope and not to get so fascinated by the system's own self-image of eternal indestructibility. as to believe in it. False hopes, no he knew enough not to believe in them. But irrevocable pessimism, that was the real danger, the destructive danger, that was what had to be refused.

Should he have followed Francesca along the corridor to her hotel room, was that what the fluttering finger contact and toothy smiles indicated, invited, instructed? or was that all part of a build up to the 'I think you've misunderstood.' He'd been there too many times to go through those routines again. He lay back in his bed and the specks of dust in the moonlight congealed into the voluptuous forms of former episodes, previous couplings.

He was suspicious of them all now, the red lips, the sharp teeth, what was it all for ? Maybe he'd been writing and reading too long and was bored with the surface narrative, maybe only an intimated sub-text could sustain his interest, maybe against all the current movements he was demanding meaning. He found less and less interest in going through the motions, the motions had all been gone through for centuries, now he wanted to know the motivations, glimpse the prime mover. If it wasn't just sex, if the merely personal was discounted, then what purpose could it serve ? Disruption, of course, destabilizing relationships, so you went back home either remorseful or dissatisfied, confessional or concealing, and the days of recrimination followed, fights, separations, divorces, divisions of property. And amidst it all no time to write, none of the necessary peace and stability and tranquillity and boredom in which to create the magnificent works. So if the intention was to prevent the works, to destroy the harmonies from which the writing might issue, then these little adventures could be very effective.

Or were they meant to establish long term connexions, continuing liaisons, in which every passing phrase and mood and plan could be monitored, the regular renewed encounter, tell me what you've been up to, where you're off to, what you've been writing, where you're sending it, who's publishing it, who's translating it, who's negotiating for the foreign rights, the movie rights, the television rights, what stage all these plans are at, how marvellous, how exciting, what a magnificent lover you are,

no one has excited me like this, what are you writing about next, how far have you got, what does your agent think, do you have an agent ?

And then the shadow would fall and the book lapse, lying untouched in the publisher's cupboard, and the contract never arrived and the translation deal evaporated and the movie deal collapsed as movie deals so often do, nothing personal. He knew all about that, the sudden frost, the silence, the agent, the publisher, the director always in a meeting, can you get them to call me back ?

The rule was never to tell anyone what you were working on till it was finished, never to tell anyone what was finished till it was published, never to tell anyone what was published till it was reviewed: or was that too crazy, where did the sequence stop? In his experience there was no safe point, anywhere along the process something could intervene and with no explanations, or no explanations that made persuasive sense, the project would lapse, somebody would have got to somebody, and that was it, the rest was silence.

It wasn't only a matter of pillow talk. You didn't have to be in bed with someone to say too much. If he thought about it, and he was beginning to, he would realize he had said too much over lunch and dinner. He may not have talked about his latest project, he may not have named his translators, he may not have revealed his movie contacts, useless as they seemed to be anyway. But he had certainly said too much about his suspicions, his world view, his sense of how the literary world was controlled. Just talking. They didn't even have to fuck him to get him to talk. Just ply him with booze and flattery, just direct a glistening smile, a wide eyed attention his way, turn a throbbing ear towards him and off he went. And wasn't this what conferences were for, take you away from your home base, plunge you amongst strangers with eager eyes and ears who would listen to your sad tales of woe, unacknowledged in your home town, neglected on your native campus, unrecognized, unappreciated, no one to talk to, no one who cares about the serious things, it's so good to meet people who really care, who are really interested, who really listen, who take it all in and down, and you with it.

The moonlight shone, the curtain wafted gently in the still air, the young ladies ,with their brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips, whispered together and laughed their silvery, musical laugh.

One said:- 'Go on ! You are first, and we shall follow; yours is the right to begin.' The other added: - 'He is young and strong, there are kisses for us all.'

He was having his breakfast of endless coffee and hot cakes, hidden in the furthermost corner that unsociability could find, when Francesca fluttered in with the

poet Prickett. She scanned the room with the serenity of conquest, Prickett slavering along behind. Graham felt a pang in his stomach that wasn't only the filthy coffee. Prickett had been the other side of her at dinner while Graham revealed the grand design of cultural control. Had she been playing footsies with both of them, her legs spreading wider and wider ? His literary lad's machismo was affronted, outmanoeuvred by old Priapus. All his self-congratulation at evading entrapment evaporated, now it seemed a hollow victory, a rationalization of defeat, now he had to accept that all his charm had served only to butter the sticky way of arousal for the oily Prickett. It also seemed to cancel all his theories. If anybody was a trusty of every secret service, if anyone was heaped with unmerited honours for unknown services rendered, Prickett was the man. There was no way she could be waylaying this pillar of establishment complicity to destabilise him, no way she could be the honey trap for such an unambiguous functionary of the system as him. It put in doubt Graham's whole analysis.

He knifed into his syrupy hotcakes and kept his eyes averted as she paraded round the room, old Satyriasis in tow, till she had shown him off enough and settled on the table of her choice. Of course they might simply have met in the lift coming down. Who could ever tell ? Graham could tell, he could read that self-satisfied glow, that snuffling smugness usually characteristic of the pallid Prickett's verse alone but now exuding from his every pore, at least from the facial ones you could see. No, there could be no doubt. In the end Graham had to raise his eyes again, just to make sure. Francesca waved at him, beckoned him over to join them.

He took his cup across to the fill it up again table, maybe he could just nod wisely as he passed them and return to his corner, but then he should have left his cup behind and been evidently on his way out, now he was stuck with a full cup, sit and drink it here while we smile over our syrup. He called for help.

It came in the shape of the editor who had told her to do more work on her story. There he was, standing at the coffee jug, 'I don't think we've met,' said Graham, introducing himself, 'Ah, I was hoping to see you,' said the editor, 'I liked that piece but it was too long, far too long.' 'I know,' said Graham, 'I was trying it on, really, hopefully.' 'I could see that,' said the editor, 'it took me back, Acapulco gold, the good old days, I haven't seen that in a story for years, gee man, I remember that shit, sitting on the pyramids, what a blast, watching the sun set, or was it rise, bombed out of your skull, all those ghosts of human sacrifice rising up around you, man, those were the days.'

Standing there in his off the peg suit, bespectacled, bemused, short hair, tie, the two of them embodiments of invisible ordinariness, Graham in his conference

blue blazer, college tie, hideous shoes, the shoes the federal agents and drug squad used to wear in the good old days.

'The worse thing,' the editor said, 'the worst thing was having to get down. You could climb those pyramids stoned, it was like levitation man, you just levitated up those pyramids, but when it came to getting down, man, they weren't designed to come down from.'

'Eternally high,' said Graham, 'were any of us designed to come down ?'

The editor looked round the room.

'Some were, I think.'

Francesca no longer beckoned.

'Where're you sitting ?' said the editor.

They went back to Graham's obscure spot and the editor ordered his breakfast and they talked about Thai sticks and Durban poison and temple balls and top grade Afghani and the room emptied around them, leaving them there, lost in space and time, striking contact highs off happier realms remembered, the waiters cleaning up around them.

'Did you have an affair with that Frances person ?'

'No, absolutely not.'

'What do you mean, "absolutely" not ?'

'Just not.'

'Why the "absolutely" ?'

'I was being emphatic.'

'You mean you tried to have an affair.

'No.'

'She tried.'

'I don't know. I didn't ask her. She seemed to settle on the poet Prickett.'

'So you missed out ?'

'What's all this about ?'

'She phoned you up.'

'What did she want ?'

'That's what I'm asking you.'

'Well how would I know ? I didn't get the call, did I ?'

'I don't know. Did you ?'

'What do you mean, "Did you ?" ?'

'Did she phone again ?'

'I don't know. I didn't know she'd phoned at all. What did she say ?'

'She said she needed to talk to you.'

'What about ?'

'She wouldn't say.'

'Maybe she's inviting me to do a reading.'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you ?'

'I don't know. Depends what it's worth.'

'A little intimate get together.'

'Look, why are you going on like this ? There's nothing between us.'

'That's not the impression she gave.'

'I can't help the impression she gave.'

'She said you'd understand.'

'Understand what ?'

'She implied there was some special understanding between you.'

'Well, she was a writer and the rest were mainly academics and spooks so I talked to her. But that was all. But in the end I decided she was probably a spook anyway.'

'Is that why you didn't screw her ?'

'Oh , for heaven's sake.'

'It's never stopped you in the past, anyway.'

'Why're you going on like this ?'

'Because I don't believe you.'

'Why not ?'

'Because.'

'Because what ?'

'Because there was something in the way she spoke.'

'Like what ?'

'Like there was some special thing between you. I can tell when people speak. They say more than they mean to say.'

'Well, I can't help what she said.'

'It's not that she even said much. It's what she insinuated.'

'There was nothing to insinuate.'

'Well, I'm glad. So why did she need to make an international call ?'

'I've no idea. Maybe she's a phone freak.

'How did she get the number ?'

'I probably gave it to her.'

'Why ?'

'Because she said she was probably going to be visiting here.'

'Oh, that'll be nice.'

Somehow he didn't think it would be.

He was reading Francesca Templar's novel when he came across it again. Déja vu. The same dialogue, give or take a few idioms.

He'd got the book in accord with World Poetry Circuit item 21. The poets exchange books and addresses. That must have been when he gave her the phone number, if he did. 'Sign it for me. Put your phone number there.' Now he was going beyond the call of duty and reading the book. It wasn't bad. He had to concede that. When she was good she wasn't bad, but when she was bad she was truly horrid. There it was. The female lead phones up the male she has met and the wife answers. The call triggers off the wife's suspicions from its very evasiveness. 'No, no message, I just had to talk to him, he'll know what it's about.' The triggering device for the cataclysm. Catechism, recrimination, rage, separation. Husband and wife part. Fifteen years of family life exploded in a moment's call.

It wasn't an especially original plot device. There were no doubt many similar versions of it, though he couldn't recall them offhand, maybe they weren't in the sort of novels he read. It surely wasn't a unique creative moment. Indeed rather the opposite, well tried, well tested. And now she was doing it in the life. *Roman verité*. Was she unaware, could a novelist be so unaware of the real life implications of her fictional devices ? Or was it a fictional device observed and practised in the life, its inclusion in the novel simple transcription rather than inspired fabrication ? Had she done it before ? Was what he was asking ? And even if she hadn't, when she did it this time, hadn't she wondered what effect it might achieve ? Or was she on automatic pilot, running her life from her own pre-recorded lines ?

It made you think, anyway. It made him think. Was this from the spook's manual of dirty tricks, or from the North American creative writing handbook of plot lines ? Or was there no distinction between the two, was there just one book, and it was being thrown at him ?

Francesca made her progress. She descended on the fabled shores ready to launch her latest, accept a prize or two, meet the press, meet the people.

She caught Graham a couple of times by phone. Could he arrange for her to be a writer in residence ? She'd had it all fixed up by the poet Prickett but his wife had intervened and prohibited it. She had even stopped the poet doing a reading Francesca had arranged for him. Now she had banned her from the poet's sphere of influence.

Why does she tell me this ? Graham asked himself. Why doesn't she arrange a reading for me ? But would I want to go ?

The second call she invited him to the party her publishers were putting on for her. Graham accepted as he always did but as the time came nearer he felt he didn't want to go. But then, he felt he didn't want to go to most places any more. There again, he didn't get invited to too many places so maybe the few he did get invited to he should go to. Let them know he wasn't dead. That way he might get invited to more, which he didn't want to go to, after all, what good ever came out of them, these events ?

So he spent the afternoon round at the fishing club and they brewed up some hash coffee, as a way of cutting down on the tobacco intake, and they watched a video movie about a writer who committed himself to the left and came to no good. He would have happily stayed on but he'd told Lily he'd be back in time to go to the party. If it had been him alone, if he hadn't made this arrangement, he probably would never have got there, everything was telling him not to go.

He felt even more unwillingness driving there, but maybe that was just the hash coffee stone, soporific rather than speedy, the traffic seemed inordinately difficult, and when they arrived at the place there was a car parked outside with the registration SPY 007. It was all too blatant. With a sign so explicit how could you have ignored it, how could you not have turned round and gone back home ?

He managed the first part. Talked when spoken to. Greeted Francesca politely and then kept out of her way. But there came a point when she pinned him down, summoned him to her table and pinned him down, turned the full beam of her intimacy on him, poured him another drink, nibbled his ear, somewhere near the jugular anyway, and the rest was amnesia.

'That's very convenient,' said Lily, as he lay amidst the vomit in his bed.

Bits he remembered. Falling into the potted palm, yes he did remember that. Being half carried, half dragged to the car. A bit of that came back to him.

'You don't remember crawling all over her ?'

'No.'

'Kneeling at her feet ?'

'No.'

He didn't even know whether these were specific actions or metaphors of how he'd been, he didn't even remember talking to her, he remembered avoiding her to begin with, and then nothing.

The phone rang and it was Francesca, to tell Lily how appalled she was at the whole occasion, how appalled she was at Graham's behaviour, she had never been so deeply shocked and appalled and offended in her life.

Lily relayed the message. 'She wants to speak to you.'

'No,' said Graham.

He was too sick. And to be abused, no. He was already being abused.

'I'm leaving anyway,' said Lily. 'For good.'

There he was in the silent home. He bundled the sheets out to the wash. Then he lay on the bathroom floor, still retching.

Over the years there were other occasions like this, half a dozen, maybe even a dozen, the public function where suddenly he'd be mesmerized and remember no more, two or three hours of amnesia, in which he would be in deep and embarrassing dialogue with some female whom he did not especially like, for whom he had no feeling of desire, and anyway in the old days of desire you just went off and did it, or arranged another time and place to meet, you didn't make these three hour public displays, he didn't like public displays, he didn't like long wooing, long games playing. So how did he end up hooked like this, these long public displays of idiocy, then a night of nausea and vomiting, days of recrimination, disruption, sickness ? It wasn't as if he rarely drank. He had always drunk, this was the literary machismo, hold your drink. There were endless sessions where he drank all afternoon and evening and was still approximately functioning, getting blasted with some visitor or new found crony and staggering back amiable and repetitive, total recall again and again as he repeated the bon mots, agreements, resolutions, good decisions they had made. Drunk without a doubt. But not this amnesia and vomiting, not like these other occasions when suddenly he would be locked into hours of dialogue he could never remember, frozen into a trance, vamped in the public arena. 'Somebody must have slipped you a Mickey Finn,' said his old friend who kept a pub and knew about these things. 'You reckon ?' 'Sounds like it.' It was something he never did discover for sure.

15. THE FISHING CLUB

When Ferdinand the friendly dealer, Frend for short, which he was, got busted, it was a matter of finding a new dealer, not least for Frend, who didn't feel comfortable holding quantity any more. The circumstances of the bust were murky as they generally are in such cases. He clearly wasn't worried about carrying on smoking. A bit more circumspect about it, perhaps. He moved to another flat and made sure the windows were always shut when he smoked. But he figured if they did come around and find a personal amount he could always explain that it was for his own use only, he was addicted; it would help his case, anyway, he figured, his defence insofar as he could come up with one was that it was all for personal use, stockpiled against a rainy day or a drought.

So Barry came into orbit. He'd been growing it privately and selling in bulk, but bulk selling didn't bring in a very good price and what with the difficulties of growing and a not very good season, he preferred to retail it now, if he could get a small, secure, regular group of buyers, no more than a handful. The rationale was that cut out the risk, no random purchasers, a very low profile operation on a need to know basis. For a while Graham had scrounged around, but there was no very reliable source, it was always an uncertain supply. Somewhere along the line Frend told him about Barry. He drove round. Barry was just moving house, which he did once in a while. They drove across to the new place and secured the windows and had a smoke or two. This was Barry's preferred way of doing business. The relaxed social call. He liked to sit back and have a talk. None of that old Bougis street number of money under the table and a joint on the toilet floor for you to pick up and get out quick and take it away with you. Barry liked to be civilized about it. Open a beer. Or make a pot of tea. He even used leaf tea rather than tea bags. It was like the cardigans he wore, a mark of security, middle class conformity, the cork beer mats to stop the tea cups scalding the table. The ritual was established from the beginning. The still house, the 'have a seat,' and then from one of the drawers in the sideboard Barry would produce the dope, the papers, the matches, and methodically begin to roll a joint. There was never a large quantity on display. Just an old tobacco tin with the heads and leaves already broken up ready to roll, the seeds taken out and kept for planting. Barry had a meticulous orderliness about it. The papers and bits of cardboard for filters all kept together in their tin so the place wasn't strewn with paraphernalia, so when the door bell rang it could be gathered up quickly and put away in a cupboard. You could never be sure who was at the door, neighbours, Jehovah's witnesses, the census. So, a joint would be rolled and they would share it there, and things would look up, the

colour would come back into the world, and then maybe Barry would roll another one. And then there would be a beer or a cup of tea. And at the end of the visit, after they'd smoked for a while, then Graham would raise the topic of a deal, and the scales would come out from one of the cupboards and the dope would be brought out of one of the recesses in another room and the scales would be set up and the weights put in place and the deal weighed out. And then with that safely pocketed, or inside his shirt, maybe they would have another smoke.

It was a variant on the North African mode, where the dealer rolled you a smoke so you could check the quality before buying. Of course you never knew if the stuff you bought was the same stuff that you had smoked. But with Barry, though this might have been the residual structure, now it was an occasion to share a smoke and talk, there was no issue of sampling and rejecting, he would have been deeply offended at that, rather it was as if to minimise the cash transaction aspect and to turn it into a social visit, and the purchase was an afterthought, just before you left, 'I better get another deal,' 'I might just get a deal,' this more diffident way of going about it.

It meant you couldn't just drop in for a deal and leave straightaway. Barry didn't like that. Nothing was said, but it was all structured against that, the slow procedures, there was no rushing, cupboards were opened carefully, joints assembled methodically, was it from being stoned, time lengthening itself, or was it to fill out the encompassing emptiness ? They were empty times. Graham certainly found them so. The days of frenzy had passed on, now he found himself in the superfluous category, the choices had been made, the teams had been assembled, and once again he was on the sidelines, like back at school. Now the requests were few, now he was rarely approached for reviewing, now the radio talks had gone, now the commissions had dried up, now there was no urgency, now it was a new strategy of spinning out the work to fill up the time so the emptiness would not be too hopelessly apparent. So if it took two hours to buy a deal of dope, that was two hours accounted for, what else was there to do with them, sit stoned at home and look out of the empty window. The days hung heavily. He was still writing, but that didn't take long. The Thomas Mann two hours a day principle. It was the ancillary activities that had dried up, the literary-related activities, the flurry of peripheral business. In one way he was glad it had gone, it distracted, it confused; but with it gone, then there was the emptiness and he realized how all that business had had its sustaining role, it maintained a level of activity, a network of contact, a necessary interchange of production and ideas, a living culture from which the serious work, the work he cared about, emerged. And without it, without this flurry, this sense of participation, this social engagement of the creative, he began to feel his isolation.

Sometimes Frend would be there, sometimes Fo. Or sometimes they would arrive when he was already there, one or the other or both. There was a code system. Tap on the glass door pane with a key. If the doorbell rang it wasn't someone with the code. Likewise if the door was knocked. Even so Barry still put the dope away before answering the door, coded tap or not. You never knew. It didn't take long. But sometimes it meant you were kept waiting on the doorstep. And then when you went in everything would be brought out again, or Frend would hand a joint across from where he'd been holding it in his palm, down the distant side of an armchair, still alight. Perhaps it was all more ritual than practical, the air hung heavy with smoke, sometimes Fo would arrive and say you could smell it outside the door, out in the street. Then Barry would open the back door and try and create a current of air, put one of the fans on. It might have been a ritual. But the concern gave a note, a tone to the proceedings, that edge of risk, the reminder of illegality.

'It's like a gentleman's club,' Frend put it. The armchairs. The dull, heavy furniture. The fire. Particularly the fire in winter. Frend's own flats never had fire places, the fire was a feature of another world. And Barry in his cardigan and carpet slippers. And the joint going round. What sort of gentleman's club Frend had in mind Graham never asked. The reminiscences were about squatting in London, getting stoned in India, not about the interiors of gentlemen's clubs.

And the club, that was not the aspect that appealed to Graham, it was not something he wanted at all. What would have suited him was a quick anonymous cash transaction. He had become quite used to sitting smoking alone at home. The communal aspect was no longer a necessity. It was only the lack of anything much else to do that reconciled him to it. There wasn't much he wanted to talk about much these days, he'd withdrawn from a lot of the events because he felt he talked too much at them, book launches, receptions for visiting cultural figures, nothing good ever seemed to eventuate from these gatherings and he felt time and again he'd given too much away, said what he was working on, what he was publishing, who he was dealing with, and it had all come to nothing, the deals had fallen through, the publications had lapsed. He had resolved on more discretion, silence till a deal was sewn up and delivered, the book out, marketed, sold, those public occasions he felt increasingly were listening posts where data was collected that ended up being used against you. As simple as that. So the idea of settling into a gentleman's club wasn't something he wanted at all. But he did. Settle in. Because there wasn't a lot else to do. And he figured not to talk about projects he was engaged in, to practice reticence, to

be cautious. Yes, there was no doubt, even from the beginning he was aware of the need for caution. It meant finding topics of conversation.

Barry was growing it out in the bush. Miles out. That was why he needed the big car. To take up seedlings. To take up watering cans. But it was a dealer's car. For all the cardigan and carpet slippers and short back and sides, he still had to have his dealer's car. Why be a dealer if you didn't have a dealer's car, a big car, a V8 or a Merc or a BMW ? Actually the BMW was more of a crim car, the Mafiosi and the Triads seemed to get around in BMWs. The dealer as primary producer had a Ford V8 or a Charger or a big old Mercedes. Or an off-road four wheel drive. But that might have been too obvious, what off-roads were you going on ? When it got to off-road he carried the trays of seedlings and the cans of water. There was water near by. He'd prospected the site carefully and it was near a creek. In the dry summers he could get water from the creek and save the plants. It would be a day's heavy work out in the bush every weekend or so at the crucial stage. And it had its risks. He spent three hours up a tree waiting for a bull to go away one time. Trapped there. He'd gone down to the creek for water and all these cattle were there, started following him, started getting frisky, in the end he ran, and the bull ran, and there was nothing for it but a tree. It could have been worse. They could've trampled the crop. There was enough loss from the kangaroos, nibbling, jumping around.

It kept them entertained, the fire blazing, coffee from his new espresso machine, his latest gadget, bought from the profits he made off them, but then, as he kept stressing, it was hard work, digging the plants in, watering them through the season, driving out there, harvesting, and he took all the risk, getting busted, losing the crop from animals, or from thieves, getting gored by bulls, spending days up trees, it was all effort, so given all that the price was reasonable, it was good quality stuff, they knew what they were getting, it wasn't cut with lawn-mowings, they could see the heads there, great long dried heads rich with resin, lovingly produced from a shoe box, another pair of shoes he'd bought.

They had known each other some time, the others. Graham was never really clear on how long. But the connexions went back. India. Europe. Travels on the dope trail. Now they went fishing together. Graham declined. He didn't want to be out there killing fish, that was partly it, mainly it. And he didn't want to be stuck out on the water for hours in the blazing sun; or sweeping rain, for that matter. Sure, there would be joints and they'd smoke them. But that wasn't an unqualified recommendation. In matters of life and death being stoned wasn't always the best way to be. He wasn't convinced of the maritime skills of any of them straight let alone stoned. Every

weekend fishermen were swept off rocks or boats swept onto rocks, every weekend there was minor mayhem at sea and he preferred not to be part of it.

And it was an ordeal. It took all day, Frend said. They had to rig up the trailer. They had to get all the provisions for a day afloat, the beer, food, bait, lines, gas for the outboard, lights in case they got caught in the dark, hats so they didn't get sunburned, sou'westers so they didn't get soaked, the papers for something to read, papers to roll a smoke, matches, bottle openers. The inventory was inordinate. It took them an hour or more to get started. Then they'd need a few smokes before driving off. Then they had to drive to get a good spot to put the boat in. Then someone would get hungry on the way. And then there'd be a discussion about where was best to go given the weather, the winds, the time of year, the time of day, which was getting late. And when they got somewhere there was always the chance the outboard wouldn't start, or they'd left something in the car, and then they bounced through the waves till they agreed on a likely spot. And then they'd be out there in the blistering sun waiting for fish that never came. They'd lose an anchor setting off again. Drop a few things overboard. And then there'd be a rush to get everything stowed away and the trailer hitched up in time to get down to the fish market before it was closed to get something to eat for dinner. They always concluded the fishing days with a dinner. Catch of the day. Even when they stopped going out on the harbour they still had the dinners. It was a weekend ritual, Saturday night, cooking up something expensive from the fish market and getting stoned and watching TV on into the early hours, a beer or a bottle of wine maybe though when you're smoking you don't need alcohol that much, tend not to bother with it, half drunk bottles of beer, you're more likely to get stuck into the chocolate, they always stocked up on chocolate for the late hours, the early hours, the late night TV, wind-burned, salt-caked, the rewards of the fishing club.

They never caught much but they kept on going, the harbour kept calling to them. It was redolent of dope, it was an environment they felt an affinity for. The ocean going yachts and cruisers proclaimed dope by their very being. Why else would you have an ocean going yacht ? A romantic run down from Thailand or New Guinea, keeping in international waters, no danger of interception, and then a rendezvous at night off the coast, and you sail into customs clean while the cargo is slipped ashore in a fishing boat up the Hawkesbury or Brisbane water or Pittwater. They never found any floating bales of marijuana, sealed watertight in plastic. But there was always the possibility. Bales tossed overboard at night from a freighter, each with an electronic device for homing in on. Maybe that was a bit fanciful. Why import bales anyway when you could grow it here, up the Hawkesbury river, little growing plots accessible only by boat, watered from their own creek, or maybe from a network of irrigation

pipes from a waterfall ? But all that was only the amateurs, the privateers, the small scale operators. The real trade was much more organized with police protection and cooperation. That you never doubted, the police running dealers as informers, recycling the seized dope back onto the market again. In the evenings they'd watch the current affairs reports that touched on the traffic: the police run plantations, designed, so it was said, as a long term sting to hook the criminal marketers, yet two years in a row they lost the crop, it was secretly harvested in the middle of the night, or several nights if you thought about the acreage, so much for police protection. Once in a while there would be a raid on a plantation and the sacrificial pyre of burning plants, the smoke rising up, if you could only sniff television, who would care about a bad picture and bad sound if you could inhale it ? And then there were the organized phone ins, inform on your neighbour, are those marijuana plants growing on the balcony, call us up and tell us, and did they call, how the people called. And a few years later it turned out the brains behind the scheme, the officer in charge, the drug squad boss, was running his own growing operation, greenhouses, hydroponics, the lot, and what a wonderful way that was to eliminate the opposition, get the public to call in and stamp out your business rivals, the independent operators, those not part of the police-intelligence-military-industrial complex. It was all there on television for them to watch when they came in from a day afloat, or in the Sunday papers that came out Saturday night and which they picked up on the way back from the fish market.

One time Mel came round, marauding for a bulk buy, wholesale prices of course. He sat there dominating the room. They let him dominate, happily stoned they withdrew into themselves while he sat there all assertion.

'You want to sell ?' he asked Barry.

'Not really,' said Barry, picking out seeds from a small bowl of dope with tweezers. It required meticulous attention.

'I'm in the market,' said Mel.

'Oh yes,' said Barry.

'For a good price,' said Mel.

Barry carried on picking out seeds.

'How much ?' Mel asked him.

'How much what ?'

'How much have you got and how much do you want for it ?'

'I don't really have anything,' said Barry.

'What, you already sold it, who you sell it to, you bastard ?'

'No,' said Barry, 'it was a bad crop.'

'Bullshit it was,' said Mel, 'it was a great season, one of the best.'

'Then it should be easy to get,' said Barry.

'Sure it's easy,' said Mel, 'it's always easy, I was just giving you first offer.'

It was always possible to punctuate the dialogue with a joint, sucking in the smoke and holding your breath, waiting for the joint to reach you before speaking, and then waiting while you smoked, waiting while licking papers together, there was always something requiring concentration. Or alternatively you could be spaced out, floated off on some private reverie, missing the crucial question, letting it pass and dissolve and disperse.

'So how much ?' said Mel.

'I don't have it,' said Barry. 'I'm going to have to buy, I don't have enough to see me through the winter.'

'Bullshit,' said Mel, 'you trying to tell me all you've got is hidden away in your underwear drawer ?'

Barry just shrugged.

'That's where everyone keeps it, isn't it ? Hands up everyone who keeps their dope in their underwear drawer.'

There were always these things about Mel that made Graham suspect he was a cop or an informer or an agent of some sort, unemployed, unemployable, but always getting by. He was the last person you'd tell where you kept your dope. But he was always trying something on, some bullying question, some unreasonable demand.

'I was pissed off with Frend for telling him where I'd moved to,' Barry said later.

'I can imagine,' said Graham.

'He's trouble. Wherever he goes there's trouble.'

'I think so,' agreed Graham.

Barry went out the back of the house and brought a large cardboard packing box in and laid it on the floor. He took out scissors from the sideboard to cut the plastic tape sealing it and carefully opened it up. It was full of huge, heavy heads of dope, meticulously lain lengthways, full but not crushed, so there was no damage, no flaking and powdering, and no mould. A huge box of dried heads. Barry selected a head and proceeded to snip it up, pick out the seeds, separate the stalks.

'Is this it ?' Graham asked.

'What ?'

'The last of the crop.'

'No,' said Barry. 'No, it was a good crop. Mel was right, it was a great season. A good vintage. He always knows. He knew I was bullshitting. But he doesn't know for sure.'

'You don't want to sell ?'

'Not to him. I might have to if I need the cash. But I'd rather hang on to it. I certainly don't want to sell to him. I did once and it was nothing but hassle, hassle over the money, and his mouth's too big.'

'Has he ever been busted ?'

'A couple of times that I know of,' said Barry. 'But he always gets off.'

'Oh yes,' said Graham.

'Always gets off,' said Barry.

The visit from Mel was disturbing. Graham had been avoiding him now for some years. Loud, amiable, genial, but with that bullying edge, he had been a good source of dope, a ready visitor and conversationalist. And then Graham had begun to wonder how he lived, and could find no easy answer. He was one of the first people Graham suspected of being either an agent or an informer. And how he had surfaced again. Now he knew the source of Graham's current dope supply, now that was no longer secure. If it ever was. Since Frend and Fo and Mel went back a long way together, it probably never had been. As for Barry's reaction, was that healthy paranoia or was it all theatre ? If Barry showed a suspicion of Mel, was that designed to make Graham trust Barry ? But wouldn't it have been better not to have inserted Mel into the scene at all ? Or was he inserted in order to renew the paranoia, to encourage Graham back into doubt and anxiety, that being perceived as more destabilizing than any false sense of security in which he could happily exist and write. This was the perpetual ambiguity of the secret state, were its operations designed for secret data gathering or for explicit harassment ? Did they have enough data to know who they wanted to harass, and the programme now was simply to keep the targets anxious, destabilized, paranoid: full of mistrust and unable to co-operate with anyone, unable to focus their attention on anything other than paranoia, sceptical of their true friends and allies, committed to a message of fear and defeatism and paralysed inertia ? Paranoia was an ambiguous concept. There was paranoia that was disabling, that made the wrong connexions, that saw persecutions and patterns that did not exist; and there was paranoia that was perception, that made connexions, that saw conspiracies that certainly did exist, even if the full picture was obscure and deliberately obscured. And the dope helped. The dope helped with a conspiracy view of the world. In part that was why Graham liked it. It created plots, it revealed plots. In an atomised, isolated

existence, each individual locked in a specialized role, social relationships fragmented and reduced, it was hard to see any overall picture, it was hard to get the overview of a Balzac or a Dickens. Dope allowed for some imaginative leaps, enabled a larger picture to be contemplated. And much of the data was there, out in the open. The media saturated you with data, so truths could be revealed and lost in the overproduction of information, each bit of data isolated, the connexions significantly not made, and when they were made, lost again in the continuing flow of stories and commentaries, information and disinformation.

These were the days of drugs for arms. American aircraft flying weapons to supply right wing troops in Central America and bring back drugs on the return trip. Banks whose directors were American intelligence operatives and ex-operatives financing drug deals in Australia and arms traders in Asia. The stories all came out in the papers. There were reports on television current affairs programmes. They would sit there, the stash of dope on the table, a joint going round, watching the news programmes and the documentaries. The dope connexion gave it a particular poignancy. Fields of waving marijuana in New Guinea being grown for guns. Crashed American aircraft in Central America laden with bags of white powder. When you started to look into it, drugs were involved in most of the wars of the last thirty years. The Lebanese militia were financed by the hashish trade. The Mujaheddin guerrillas fighting the communist government in Afghanistan got their guns by selling opium and hashish. The invasion of Panama to get hold of President Noriega had his involvement in the cocaine trade somewhere in its scenario, along with his role as a CIA informer. The wars of South-East Asia revolved round the golden triangle, the warlords hired to fight the communists were supplied with weapons that they paid for in opium and heroin. The only uncertainty was which came first: were the wars financed by the drug trade, or was the drug trade protected by the wars ? The interface was clear enough. It was only the sequence and priorities that seemed obscure.

The trouble was the plots were as evanescent as the curling wisps of smoke rising to the ceiling, dispersing around the lampshade. Hemp seeds of the imagination. These were the plots that never got written. Graham would sit there raving on for hours, watching the TV stories, reading bits out of the papers, but it remained analytical, cerebral. The texture of the golden triangle, the feel of the Bekka valley, the touch of a Kalashnikov were all remote. Without the felt experience, how was it possible to write about it ? These were the poignantly lost opportunities, the unlived lives, the unwritten books. Maybe this was why so many writers were on the CIA payroll, to capture the material first hand, for the alluring adventures. And having joined it, that was why the adventures never appeared, the stories were never

told, the material remained classified, and narcotic substances controlled their imaginations, paralysed the will or ability to write. Such great plots around and nothing worthwhile written about any of them. How could it be ? Only too easily.

It was a shipwrecked group, washed up recuperating there on their desert island, poised at that point of indecision, whether to collect the floating timbers and build a new vessel and set off again, or surrender to an existence of beachcombing, becalmed, memories of social connexions ever growing fainter, fading, losing even the will to language.

The world had changed and shrugged them off. They knew it would change again, the crises and cataclysms returned with a regular periodicity and those now in position would themselves be shaken off. But that would be no joy to the shipwrecked, except a tired satisfaction of time's revenges: they would not be shrugged back into place. It didn't work like that. A new breed of the successful would be hauled on board but those shrugged off stayed shrugged off. Given that, there was not much impetus to construct a life-saving vessel. They might as well stay stoned on their island refuge, if only it were an island, if only it could be totally severed from the unfriendly world, if only it were a refuge. So present time conversations were not especially interesting. Job frustrations, job frustrations. There was not much personal life to impart.

What about the past ? Sometimes they would recur to it. A figure they had known from the glorious past would appear on television, secure now, media figure, lawyer, spokesperson on human rights, filmmaker.

'All these filmmakers, they're hopeless, have you ever seen any of their films, they're unwatchable.'

'They do well overseas,' Frend would say.

'Only because they dump then. They sell them for peanuts. It costs nothing to run them compared with making new product.'

'Why are they so popular then ?'

'Are they so popular ? What makes you think they are popular ? Because the media says so. Well they would, wouldn't they ? They're committed to hyping it all.'

'They get good reviews overseas.'

'That's only tokenism. The stuff's so inept they think it's quaint. They like it in Europe because it's not American and they like it in America because it's not European. And it doesn't threaten anyone. It's like stick drawings. Primitivism. In the 1920s all the European artists got into primitivism because their own culture was

bankrupt. The mass media always lags behind. Now they think it's new and artistic because it's inept and primitive.'

'If that's so then how come all those directors get jobs in Hollywood ?'

'Good question,' said Graham.

'Go on then, answer it.'

A few more tokes and the ideas came.

'It doesn't make any industry sense,' Graham said. 'Maybe they come a bit cheaper than American directors. Maybe they're more willing to compromise because they're so eager to make it in America so they're easier to deal with than American directors.'

'Maybe they're better.'

'They're not better. They're just ordinary. You've seen the movies. They're just ordinary. So why are they hired ?'

'That's what we're asking you.'

'I'll tell you why they're hired. Australia is crucial to America in the Pacific. It's the only secure place for military bases. Trading stations. All that stuff. Everywhere else there's local resistance.'

'There's resistance here.'

'There's protest here but not resistance. And even the protest is piss weak. In Vietnam the Americans were defeated. In Thailand the American bases were kicked out after the Vietnam war. In the Philippines there was armed opposition, so after the earthquake they just left. Even New Zealand refused to let them bring in ships with nuclear warheads. They've withdrawn and withdrawn and withdrawn. Australia's the only country in the world they send the girls out to welcome the American fleet. Anywhere else there are riots when they visit. So why aren't there riots here ? Because the media are all controlled. They're all in the pockets of the American corporations. And the intellectuals and artists have all been bought off and are in the same pockets. How do you make it here if you're a writer or a filmmaker ? You get invited to America. How do you make it if you're an academic ? You get invited to America. It's simple. It's not repression to begin with. It's bribery. Be a good boy or girl and we'll hire you in the USA. So all the filmmakers know not to be anti-American. If they want a career. They don't even have to think it out explicitly. They just see their rivals getting jobs in Hollywood. So they figure, I want to go to Hollywood too, so that screenplay about ugly Americans I'll just pass by. And the Americans know that film and TV are the important media. They're the mass media. They're the media that can win peoples' hearts and minds. So you keep it tame by buying up the local filmmakers and giving them work in Hollywood and that keeps all the up and coming ones in line too. And nothing critical ever gets said.

'It's the same principle they used with academics in England and Europe. They created a two-tier system. Like the American university system in fact: Ivy League and the rest. The ones who got invited to visiting lectureships or got to teach summer schools for American students, or got flown over for seminars: and the others who didn't get invited. It made the one lot look like high powered jet-setting international intellectuals, and the others like also-rans. And the money for summer schools and visiting lectures was big money. So it created a wealth division. So, be smart, say nothing nasty about the United States and say nothing nice about the left and you too can be an international intellectual airport celebrity. A star.'

He spat some grass off the end of his tongue.

'It suborned the whole culture,' he said.

'What was the new left anyway ? It was just a way of discrediting the old left. All it did was attack the traditional myths that had held the left together; it either said they were racist, sexist, élitist, Stalinist or any other thing they could come up with, or totally suppressed them. It tried to present itself as new and that meant discrediting or denying the left of the past.

'What about the women's movement ? How did that spring up everywhere simultaneously ? It wasn't a matter of a slow spread of ideas. It was a co-ordinated strategy, like a marketing campaign. And what it served to do was to divide the left. It fractured all the progressive forces; the left was torn apart. It's perfect. It makes two distinct categories: men and women. If it had been an authentic leftist movement it would have worked on finding common ground, correcting sexism, sharing roles. But that isn't what happened. It ended up dividing the progressive forces. What better way of destroying the left than dividing it into two ? That immediately halves its effectiveness. And when did this happen ? At a point when a popular progressivism had taken hold in the west, when opposition to racism and opposition to the Vietnam war had grown into a larger progressive front. It was the beginning of a full scale movement, and it was threatening because it came at the time the baby-boom reached voting age. So suddenly you get four times as many kids reaching adulthood with a widespread progressive set of values. So how do you stop it ? Some smart people in some social research institute or intelligence agency basement look at history.

'They've already tried breaking the unions by race policy in the USA.. They broke strikes in the 1930s by shipping up black unemployed labourers to take the jobs of striking white workers. They broke the socialist union gains of Britain after world war two by organizing large scale immigration to fill the badly paid jobs so they could keep them badly paid. And the cunning of that was they brought in two distinct

and they hoped incompatible black groups, African West Indians, and Indians and Pakistanis. So the British proletariat was split between poor whites, Asian Indians and Africa West Indians. The idea was the race mix would lead to racist separatism and hostility rather than unionized solidarity. It worked. Who says racist policies were abandoned with the defeat of Hitler ?

'So they knew how to run a divide and rule policy. But how are you going to control a radicalized baby-boom student population ? Ship in African and Asian students to take their student places ? Too difficult. These are kids from middle-class homes, the parents are too vocal, too organized, they'd protest at that. So you have to find some way to set them against each other. How can you divide them up ? Brilliant. On gender grounds. The radical movement of the 1890s broke up into fragments, women's rights became a separate agenda of the suffragettes and the common socialist unity was broken. There was a historical precedent and they saw it. And used it.'

'Who's this they ?'

'Oh, smart dead white males in the intelligence establishment, you can bet. It would be the last fling of the patriarchy, short term strategies. And it worked. Within a decade the left had been utterly divided. Then they did the same trick again to make further divisions. Gay rights. Minority rights. All the separatist ethnic and nationalist fractions. The old left issues are wiped away and replaced by gender issues and ethnic issues It all gets enshrined in anti-discrimination legislation. But the categories missing from anti-discrimination practice are class and politics. Those are the areas of radical solidarity they were determined to remove from the agenda. And it worked, didn't it ?

'And at the same time they'd been attacking the young with dope. After the new left had cut away the history and traditions of the old left and used a generational politics to destroy the strength of that tradition and cut off its roots, then dope was brought in. Suddenly dope was everywhere. Everywhere simultaneously. Again it's not just a matter of imitation. You hear of people using it in America so you start using it in Australia or England or Germany. How come it's waiting there for you to use, in bulk? And why does it come at that point, at the height of the anti-racism and anti-war protests ? The four times larger than before baby-boom population suddenly takes to dope. How are they all able to get it so suddenly ? Someone must have been gearing up beforehand. Not just growing one crop, but collecting enough seeds to grow the crop. It has to have been organized. And it has to have been organized to narcotize a radicalized youth culture. Get them stoned and they'll stop rioting. That's why all the revolutionary anti-colonialist regimes opposed dope. They saw dope was

used to keep the colonised peoples quiet, keep them stoned, keep them apathetic and demoralised.'

'Pass the joint, Graham.'

He took another two or three tokes before handing it on. There was a brief silence as he held the smoke in.

'*Le kif détruit le corps et l'ésprit*.'

'I used to have that poster,' said Fo.

'Dope came in as a means of control. First of all grass, then heroin. They used it on student radicals and they used it on blacks. They destroyed Harlem in the sixties, turning a progressive self-help black community into a narcotized crime-ridden ghetto. The same in Britain. Until the sixties there was no drug problem. Heroin addicts registered as addicts with the National Health Service and paid for their fix at cost. Then the Americans foist their DEA policy on Britain, it's all criminalised, addiction rises, crime rises, and all the areas of high unemployment like south London, Manchester, Edinburgh, become centres of heroin use. It destroys the communities, keeps the unemployed stoned, prevents a radical co-operative politics.

'And then you get the interface of intelligence agencies and organized crime. The agencies need someone at the operational end. When they wanted to break the communist control of the waterfront in Marseilles they used Corsican gangsters to beat the shit out of the communist unions. The gangsters took over. Their pay off was running the Indo-China heroin trade. Or was it a pay off ? Maybe they were told it was a pay off but that was what the agencies wanted all along. Then the dope is used to narcotize potentially dissident elements. Intellectuals, musicians, writers, bohemians, student radicals - it spreads and spreads. And the money generated selling it goes to buy arms for the anti-communist warlords running the trade, the ones who buy it up from the poor peasants growing it. The crime networks do the marketing, the intelligence agencies protect them in the areas they want the stuff sold. They've always worked together, the agencies and crime. When the Americans were worried about sabotage on the waterfront in world war two they let Lucky Luciano out of gaol to organize the mafia to make the docks secure. When the Americans went in to liberate Sicily, he went in with them. Now the triads are taking over the trade. Who did the Americans use to smuggle anti-communists out of China after Tianemen ? The triads. Organized crime is the licensed arm of political violence.'

Maybe some of the details were inaccurate but the general picture was surely true enough. That was the great thing about marijuana. It made connexions. Not hashish, he found that more deadening, more narcotizing. But marijuana got the ideas flowing. And the fishing club provided the background. He couldn't sit at home in his study and rave to himself. And when really stoned it was easier to think than to write,

so he didn't write it all down. Besides, these were all ideas and he saw himself as a fiction writer. He needed character, setting, expressive action. He was still trapped in that Henry Jamesian model of the novel, locked into the aesthetic imperative that made it so hard to insert ideas. The connexions fascinated him, obsessed him. But he couldn't see how to fictionalize them. So he sat there rehearsing the ideas, raving on with the bowl of dope on the table, and Barry sitting there impassively, and sometimes Frend, sometimes Fo, sometimes they chipped in, sometimes they simply let him rave on, it was accepted, that was the good thing about the fishing club, raving on was a component of getting stoned and this was where you got stoned so they let him rave on, sometimes they'd let out a sigh when they found it all too heavy, but most times they were happy enough to have someone raving on, stoned and silent themselves, close to nodding off, tired after their unrewarding jobs, being harangued like that not too intolerable, and over the years some of the more outlandish and unlikely theories were revealed as true, it all made all too inevitable sense.

And how real had the movement been anyway ? What was 68 all about ? Suddenly you got student movements in Paris, Prague, Belgrade, London. It was meant to look like it was a spontaneous revolution. But what was it really about ? It was an anti-communist movement in Prague and Belgrade. And effectively that was what it was in Paris where it was an ultra leftist event designed to displace the communists, to make them look old fashioned and fuddy-duddy and reactionary. All it did in England was discredit the left and discredit students. To the public the student movement looked like the left on the rampage, they didn't know or care about the differences between communists and socialists and anarchists and Trotskyites. But it drove a rift between the old left and the new students. Under the guise of left-wing activism the movement split the left. Everywhere it gave the excuse for repression, for more controls, for stronger security services, for more police. It gave the grounds for purges. People were weeded out, their contracts not renewed, they didn't get tenure, didn't get promotion, as a result of getting caught up in it all. The activity served to flush out the potential radicals. And what was left ? A lot of nihilistic theory, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, all that negation that masqueraded as liberationist, that claimed the revolution of 68, and turned out to be objectively utterly reactionary.

So was any of it real ? Maybe the whole movement was theatre. It was like burning off, so when things get really hot you don't get a dangerous bushfire. 68 in the west was a controlled burning off to prevent a revolution. It was led by secret service pseudo-leftists, intelligence agent Trotskyites, professional provocateurs and psychopaths, and the whole point was to discredit the left by extremism and

incoherence, and flush out the potential radicals while they were too inexperienced to be in positions of power, pick them off young and neutralize them.

They thought of the heroic figures of the movement they had known, now they were barristers and TV producers and economic rationalist propagandists and computer programmers and financiers. Had they ever been real, even to begin with ? Or had they always been marked for success and just putting their two or three years of undercover service in, rewards promised to come ?

'Have you written this down ?' asked Frend.

'Where would I write it ?'

'I don't know man, I just thought you might have written it.'

'Who would publish it ?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Nobody would touch it,' said Graham. 'There isn't even a pseudo-left any more. In the past there were all those dodgy publications that looked like they were oppositional. At least there was the illusion of an alternative. There was a limping piss-weak left wing press and a seedy, struggling alternative press and they were probably both subsidized by the CIA so they could keep their fingers on the pulse or wherever they liked to keep them, and they made sure the papers were edited by incompetents or stooges who would never make them successful, and they flushed out the radicals that way by finding out who'd write for them and no harm was done as far as they were concerned because the circulations were so pathetic. But at least that gave the illusion of dissent. Now they don't even feel the need to maintain an illusion. Now there's nothing.'

'Not even any dope magazines,' said Barry.

Sad days, terminal days, days of monopoly and control.

They rolled another joint as Graham lapsed into silence.

And even the dope was starting to run out. Barry would count the number of boxes left and the rate of consumption and shake his head gloomily.

It was all gloom.

The dope stock ran lower and lower. Well, it would, wouldn't it ? There was still leaf but the heads were pretty well consumed. That didn't especially worry Graham, he was happy with leaf, it was cheaper. But the others preferred heads. More than preferred. They needed that heavier, narcotized effect, leaf didn't give what they wanted. Graham found it did for him, it had the slightly speedy component that got him thinking, got him writing, at least writing till he got too stoned to face sitting at the keyboard. He tried shifting to longhand, but the effort of keeping the pen between

thumb and forefinger when stoned was more than you really wanted to deal with. But it was all right for first thing, waking up from a dreamless sleep, looking at the early morning light, rolling a smoke, making a pot of tea, rolling another, it wasn't a bad life, if he started writing before the third joint it was fine, even if there was nowhere to publish it, even if no one asked for anything any more, even if there was nowhere he'd want to publish anything any more, in that early morning light there was still a factitious freshness, a brief stoned energy, a flow of words.

But the heads were running out. He went round one evening, walked round, balanced his anxiety about smoking too much by tying in a keep fit component, walking there and back, filling up the emptiness with exercise, and it meant the car wasn't parked out there, identifiable, and who was going to follow him on foot these technological days ? There was a delay in answering the door, a longer than usual delay, he tapped again, the coded key on the glass panel, and it was Fo there.

'Barry's away,' he said.

'Oh.'

'Come in anyway, I was just watering the plants.'

Not a doorstep you wanted to stand too long on, whoever knew, if you did stand there you kept your back to the road.

'Yes,' said Fo, 'Barry's in India.'

'In India ?'

'He just upped and went.'

'Is that a –?'

'Holiday ?' said Fo. 'I told him it was a bad idea, but you know what he's like.'

Graham wasn't sure that he did.

'He reckons he'll be all right. Do you want a beer or anything ?'

'No, not really,' said Graham, 'I just walked round, I was out of –' He let it tail away, the significant absence.

'There's still some leaf,' said Fo, 'that's all there is though.'

He disappeared into the back of the house and came back with a brown paper bag.

'Shall I fix it up with you ?'

'On the house,' said Fo.

'That's nice.'

'Plant waterer's fee,' said Fo. He fumbled in his pockets for some papers and they rolled a number.

'I told him it was a bad idea, but he reckons he knows what he's doing.'

'When's he get back ?'

'Another week.'

'Let's hope he makes it.'

'You can say that again.'

The house was dark, still, empty. Fo hadn't got the complex series of table lamps and subdued lighting going which you didn't notice till it wasn't there. No fire, no window open, there was a disturbing silence. They sat there in temporary suspension. And the anxiety palpable around them like the cars in the street, swishing past.

The hashish got them through the winter and the spring. Spring saw another planting, the seedlings grown under gauze in the back yard, sheltered by a jungle of bamboo and bushes grown in pots, a portable screen of greenery. The logistics of it all were considerable. With the dob in a neighbour operation the police were running, it was not safe to grow the seedlings openly, and not many places were designed with private growing alcoves. They'd speculate on that round the table, passing round the pipe, how you could design a hidden roof area with sky lights, something the casual visitor would never know about, and the sky lights opaque to block out the prying surveillance of helicopters, telephone linesmen, tilers, tree-loppers and such like. The alternative was a sealed room with artificial lights set on an automatic cycle. Again it required a large outlay of equipment and it could be hard to explain a sealed off room. Something in the roof would be better. Balconies were not the answer, anything grown in the open was always liable to some intrusive observation. These anyway were all dreams as they circulated the pipe. Barry's immediate practical solution was the mobile jungle, the huge pots of shrubbery manhandled into position, a gauze netting rigged up around them, over them, so that it looked like a tropical fernery or an orchid farm, some sort of obsessive horticultural craziness requiring regular watering, and the seedlings grew in trays amidst it all till they were big enough to be transplanted in the bush.

While inside the house the Indian artefacts spread like the spoils of Aladdin's cave. Semi-precious stones, bangles, carvings, chests, trunks, an extraordinary cornucopia of objects. Was this just madness ? Was this just an obsession for objects, an insecurity manifesting itself in random materiality ? Was this the squandering of the money he'd made from selling them dope ? Or was it an investment, objects bought to be resold at profit ? Or was it masquerade, the cover for the trip, the cover for the money in the bank, to claim that it was generated by selling relics of the raj ? There was no way of telling. Graham had no idea whether the objects were of any

value at all, no way of knowing whether they would ever be resold, was there a way of selling them, were there margins there for profit ? It could all have been florid craziness, hashish illusions in the dim room, the hissing of the hose outside watering the seedlings, the semi-precious stones reflecting shafts of light, the inlaid writing desk, the carved chests and trunks, the elephants, filling up the room so that it became harder and harder to move, the corridors of access smaller and more devious, the whole place increasingly like some thieves' den, with the golden scales weighing out the blocks of hash, glinting in the twilight, while on television another crop of marijuana went up in flames.

Sitting round there having a smoke, sharing a smoke, buying a smoke, Graham watched a lot of television. Other people's television always seemed more interesting. Maybe that was because Barry had it on most of the time, flickering away there to dispel the emptiness, like a fire ceremony to propitiate the spirits. It all provided further data for conspiracy theories. He was always surprised at how much of the official line they believed, Barry, Frend and Fo, as they sat there smoking the 007 brand hash, brand-name stamped in gold lettering on the blocks, presumably some British secret service proprietary that organised the trade, the hash bought from the Mujaheddin guerrillas in Afghanistan in exchange for arms, and shipped via the Pakistani military to their Indian opposite numbers and marketed under licence from the UK. After a couple of joints it became Graham's mission to demystify them. He would have demystified the world, but there were no channels left now, none he knew of, none he tried to break into, anyway. He had surrendered it, the world, he broadcast his theories privately. Like the great air disasters. Did anyone believe KAL 007 wasn't a spy plane, or pretending to be a spy-plane, provoking Soviet defence systems, asking to be shot down ? It was a game that had been played for years, straying into Soviet air space in the 1950s and listening to the radio traffic that provoked, monitoring the alerts and defence procedures. The story had been run in an Oxford undergraduate magazine in the 1950s and the editor sent to gaol. So KAL 007 was an easy one. But was Lockerbie that difficult ? Was it coincidence the CIA station chief from Beirut was flying back to the USA on it ? Didn't that suggest he was the target ? And who better to blow him up than the CIA itself ? Why was it blown up over Scotland ? So they could use Scottish law and get a not proven verdict on whatever they wanted not proven. Frankfurt, which American intelligence had had as its regional centre for years, why was the bomb loaded there ? Would they kill a whole plane load to get rid of one person ? It would depend on what that one person knew, if someone had such sensitive information that they were flying back with it rather than trusting it to electronic transmission, mightn't that information be the reason ? That was the story of the airbus that crashed in Thailand; there it was

someone personally carrying information on the heroin trade that inevitably incriminated top politicians and military let alone the CIA, information that again could only be delivered person to person, the airwaves too open, codes too decodable. So to stop the information being delivered to wherever it was going, the United Nations was one story, a whole plane load was blown up.

'Where do you get these stories ?'

Sometimes they were in the papers, briefly, and then not followed up; sometimes they were on television, and the theorist not invited back; sometimes people came up with them, people he talked to at conferences, visiting cynical writers and academics, enthusiasts of the news not fit to print, sometimes it was just a matter of reading between the lines, deducing it, following past models, knowing history, having bright ides, having a smoke. And most of it came down to dope, the politics of control: dope, guns or culture.

As for terrorism, who believes in it ? There are two sorts of terrorism. There's the one where political enemies are assassinated. Guns, bombs, umbrellas, poison, whatever. Specific targets who are finally caught up with. That pisses off the Americans or the English or the Europeans who have given sanctuary to some corrupt ruling class hireling, some CIA MI6 asset. And then there's the other sort where there are random bombs, mass killings, scare campaigns where innocent bystanders are killed. Now given that some so-called innocent bystanders are actually the target and the media cover that up, there are still a lot of mass random killings put down to Arab terrorists, the IRA, the Libyans and so on. But these are the suspicious ones. These are the secret service killings that pretend to be terrorism and that give the excuse for military action, like bombing Tripoli. Any authentic terrorist knows you get a negative effect from killing ordinary innocent people, so they don't do it. The secret services know that too, so they do do it, in the name of terrorism. Maybe they use some psychopaths, some off the air crazies, who think they are doing it for the cause; that way it looks authentic. But it's all manipulation, to get bigger secret service budgets, to manipulate public opinion, to discredit liberationist causes.

It was a boy's own club. Musty bound volumes from the beginning of the century, sharing a hookah in a booth deep in the bazaar, trading gossip of the great game. In disguise in the socco, the snake charmers and jewel thieves, beggar boys and assassins milling around, dimly discernible through the clouds of hashish smoke. No girls. A strictly bachelor society. Again, as with so much of it, Graham wasn't sure whether this was a choice or a retreat. Barry would occasionally launch into a monologue about some woman he'd met in the office, occasionally he would plan laborious stratagems of enticement and seduction, but nothing enduring ever seemed to come of this. And Frend and Fo seemed entrenchedly in retreat, they had had their

adventures which had ended in disaster, now they were barricaded against further risk. Graham avoided any dialogue here. His mistrust in that regard was general, that was an area you didn't engage in, man talk, that was the talk that could come back to haunt you. So nothing was revealed. And he was in his own retreat too, the years of adventures reassessed, the adventures that lurched into disasters, recriminations, how many were authentic, yet could they all have been Mata Haris ? Easily. Remember Che Guevara, betrayed by his girlfriend who worked for the CIA. Remember Leon Kilat, the Filipino nationalist entrapped by a woman and murdered in her bed. Remember Samson and Delilah for that matter. If they wanted to monitor you what better way than by pillow talk, if they wanted to fuck you what better way than by a woman ? It was not something he wanted to go into, not something he wanted to brood over, none of it provable, all of it possible. It had meant a withdrawal, anyway, from that world of enticements. He felt safer stoned in Aladdin's den. They all felt safer there.

But it was a retreat from everything else as well, not just womankind. Hashish was the curtain that they drew against the world. For a start these were no longer the days you could smoke a joint in public. You couldn't light up at a book launch or a literary reception, you couldn't take out a joint in a pub or a restaurant, that had been the style of a past decade but you couldn't get away with it now. You really needed to smoke at home, so that meant not going too far, for when you needed to get back for another. With random breath testing for drink driving the cops could flag down any car and the smell of dope could lead to a search, so smoking in the car was no longer a safe thing and carrying a stash in the glove box or under the seat was now too risky. And going places without dope was insupportable, the tedium intolerable, nothing really seemed worth it, not for long. He began to go to less and less, 'now I've been squeezed out' as he put it.

'You squeezed yourself out,' said Frend.

It was true in part. He'd stopped going to the things he thought were a bad idea, a wise man avoids the company of fools, he wasn't sure of his wisdom but over the years he'd got to know many of the fools, and many of the knaves, the gatherings that were listening posts, or places where you got wiped out and made a fool of yourself, where someone slipped you a Mickey Finn, spiked the punch, he'd been to enough of those not to want to go to any more. The dope combined with the paranoid perceptions, an enduring bond of multiple reasons not to go to this or that or the other. The horizons closed in. But hashish was the drug of travel, you could sit in a room and be anywhere, reveries of past trips and future fantasies dissolved merely geographical space and time, they would sit there reminiscing about buying dope in North Africa, Southern India, East London, West Coast America, or he could sit at

home before the blank page and imagine landscapes, envision the desert sands, rugged forts, the paradise gardens of the old man of the mountains. It was a gentle insulation that cocooned you from the unspeakable awfulness of social reality, the economic, the political, the terminal hopeless of it.

So more and more the only place he went was round to the fishing club, walking round if it was a reasonable evening, not raining, and generally it was reasonable, it cleared the head, exercised the atrophying muscles, and walking back, totally blasted, was like gliding through the streets of Vanity Fair, past the windows of restaurants and cafés like aquariums, bloated figures stuffing themselves with dead flesh, past the dusty junk shops, past the corner shops still open, gliding by it all.

Frend's case finally loomed up. He'd been trying delaying tactics for years. Or his lawyers had. Getting the case postponed, transferred, held over, whatever they did, in the hope of getting it altogether lost in the bureaucracy. It hung over him, year after year, but at least he wasn't in gaol. He leant on them to supply him with character references. Indeed, to be character witnesses. Worse, to front up in court, stand up and say it.

'All you've got to do is say it came as a complete surprise,' said Frend.

'And get ten years for perjury,' said Barry.

'You could say it came as a complete surprise he got caught,' said Fo.

'Can't we just write something ?' said Graham.

'The barrister wants people to front, it looks better, he says.'

'Not for us it doesn't,' said Fo.

'I'd rather not put anything on paper myself,' said Barry.

'That's a point,' said Graham.

'It's not for long,' said Frend.

'Not after remission for good behaviour,' said Fo.

It was a heavy evening's smoking, discussing strategy. They didn't come up with anything. There didn't seem anything that could be said. You couldn't even say 'Fair cop, guv,' since it looked like he'd been set up anyway.

And were they being set up too ? Was fronting as a character witness just another entrapment ? Was this the way to get your name not just on the files but on the public record ? Consorting with known criminals. Perjury. Contempt of court. Blatant disregard of proper judicial processes. Grand cynicism. Naive foolhardiness. Graham drove round to Barry's and they rolled a couple of smokes to prepare themselves. There was only one way to get through it. Blasted. They rolled another. The morning radio spelled out the time. They had that sick, early morning feeling, the

after feel of a shower, soap and shampoo, the skin not yet re-oiled, that nakedness against the elements, the clear yellow light sharp on the eyes, the nausea in the stomach.

'They never start on time,' said Barry, experienced in these matters. 'They put all these cases on and then they reschedule them and put them off when the lawyers don't show.'

But in the end they dragged themselves out, one last number for the drive, Barry locking every window, checking every door, programming the alarm system, and then off into the great gross dealers' car, lighting the last joint as the motor warmed up, rumbling in the morning light and traffic fumes, aircraft coming in low overhead to the airport.

'I wish I was on one of those,' said Barry, 'going the other way.'

They parked by the old prison wall. Convict hewn stone. Ghosts of past executions. All the repressive horror of the state. They spent the morning in cafés near the court room, the case delayed. Conversations was constrained. Who would be in cafés near the courtroom except plain clothes cops, informers, people on trial willing to trade a bit of overheard information for a favour from the police, the prosecutor, the court ? They fidgeted with the sugar bowls, automatically lifting them off the table, looking underneath, where would the microphones be, in the roof probably. Coffee after coffee till their stomachs churned.

'I just hope there's no big case on in one of the other courts,' said Frend, 'I don't want to bump into someone I know.' Reporters, barristers, old faces from the pub.

By midday it was clear the case wouldn't be on until the afternoon. Barry and Graham decided to go back.

'For a snack.' said Barry.

Frend looked ashen. 'You're coming back.'

'We'll think about it,' said Barry.

'Don't get wiped out and forget,' said Frend.

'You can come back with us if you like,' said Barry. 'Plenty of room in the car.'

But Frend was too anxious, the run up to this had been going on for so many years, now he'd steeled himself to face it, he couldn't risk missing it, finding himself delayed, too late, running away. Fo stayed with him.

'Two o'clock,' said Frend.

'Maybe I should come here more often.' Graham said, listening to the cases, endless material, maybe that's what I should be writing about, car theft, assault, endless fraud. The parade of the impoverished and hopeless and ill advised. The first case after lunch was some teenage car thief. His mother sat in widow's black, crushed. The kid was cocky, grinning. The judge delivered a homily. The kid grinned.

They gave their character references. It passed in a blur. No cross examining. Can they cross examine character witnesses ? No one seemed to know. They didn't, anyway. The judge complained about the delays in the case. Prosecution provided photographic evidence. Thousands of tabs of acid. All this for private consumption.

'I didn't know there was all that,' said Barry as they drove back.

'Nor me,' said Graham.

Barry rolled a smoke. They were still stunned.

A suspended sentence, hefty fine, arrangements to pay, regular reporting to police. Frend was happy, it could have been worse, he could have been in jail, the barrister reckoned he wouldn't but you never know.

But all those tabs of acid.

'I'm sure he never told us,' said Graham.

'If he did,' said Barry, licking the gummed paper to roll a super joint, 'if he did it was with his back to us under his breath while I was out of the room.'

Then Frend and Fo arrived back and they spent the evening relaxing, not celebrating, who knew what surveillance might still be underway, especially after all that acid, who wanted to tempt the fates any more, so it was a quiet evening's relaxation, the television flickering away, gentle post mortem of the day's details, and the doubts left to rest.

There was a point when Frend and Fo began complaining about quality.

'It's not premium grade,' said Frend, 'whatever Barry says. They might have given him some premium grade to smoke but that's not what they sold him. He got ripped off.'

'He's a salesman's dream,' said Fo. 'He just gets carried away. He gets conned.'

They were round at Frend's, sometimes they went round there for a smoke, for a change, Graham, Fo, Barry too sometimes.

'Has it been cut ?'

'I don't think it's been cut,' said Fo, looking at a block in the light of the window.

'Don't flash it around,' Frend called out, angrily.

Fo stepped back further into the room.

'That's just what I don't want, someone looking up at the window and seeing a block of hash.'

He walked across and let down the Venetian blinds.

'Can't see anything now,' said Fo, 'but it didn't look like it had been cut.'

'They usually cut it with henna,' said Frend.

'All sorts of shit,' said Fo.

'It's just not top quality,' said Frend.

'Maybe the body gets habituated to it,' said Graham. 'I used to try and get different sorts of stuff so when you stopped getting high off one lot you could switch to the other.'

'Ah well,' said Fo, 'since you mention it.'

He brought a small cellophane packet out of the recesses of his shirt.

'Heads,' he said. 'I got given them.'

'Oh yes,' said Frend. 'Who by ?'

'A friend at work. Someone had grown it up the coast and brought him some down.'

They sat in a warm fresh glow of locally grown heads. Ah, the change in the contours of the world.

'Frend and Fo have stopped buying as much,' said Barry, cutting off a block. 'Which isn't a bad thing in one way since it means it will last longer.'

He wrapped up the piece he'd cut the block off back into its layers of paper and cloth.

'As long as you keep it out of the light and away from heat and moisture it keeps its potency. It's amazing stuff when you think about it. Preserved vegetable matter. But if you keep it properly it doesn't get mould and it doesn't break down.'

He rolled one up when he'd put away the scales and the parcel of dope.

'They're complaining it's not top quality.'

He carefully rolled the gummed papers.

'They think they're connoisseurs. Bullshit.'

He lit the joint and passed it across.

'Personally I think they've found another supply and just aren't letting on. There's no way they'd cut back otherwise. They couldn't. All that talk about quality's just an excuse. I reckon they're buying from somebody else. And I reckon I know who it is. Mel. That's why they won't say. They know I won't deal with him. That's why they're so secretive. It's so obvious. And they think I can't see it.'

Barry kept his place stocked with beer and tea, chocolate, biscuits, nuts. Snacks. Things to nibble on when seized by the munchies. Again it was like an Aladdin's cave from the *Boy's Own Paper*. Indulgence food. It kept them going through the current affairs programmes and football games.

With Frend, however, it was hit and miss, increasingly miss. Barristers' fees and paying off the fine had cleaned him out. Sometimes he might have a tea bag, but rarely any milk. He'd suggest they went to the café across the road. It wasn't much of a café. You could get coffee, occasionally a cake. But it was across the road so Frend used to duck over there. Basically it was a front for a gambling operation up above. That emerged quite early on. But that in itself turned out to be a front for a heroin smuggling operation. Or at least that was where the principals used to meet to do the big cash deals, according to the report of the committal proceedings in the Sunday paper. Graham wondered about it. Was it all coincidence ? Was it some natural empathy of the drug world that dealers and ex-dealers ended up in the same geographical space ? Was it maybe the case that most of the café's in the district were fronts for something, that drugs had saturated the city ? Or had Fend been stationed there, was that the deal for keeping out of gaol, was his flat used for recording and observation devices, was he staking out the café for positive sightings ? These were the corrosive suspicions of the drug world, this in the end was the destructive paranoia of the whole milieu, the inexorable logic. It wasn't something that could be talked about, if it was true at all who knew how true it was, how extensive, who else it involved ? Was this cosy fishing club not a safe haven at all but a protected enclave in an operational mode, was its cosy illegality but a cover for a deeper surveillance cell, or was that too crazy a speculation ? What was this group he'd so conveniently stumbled into, how far back had they know each other ? Having been busted were they vulnerable, were there pressures on them ? Probably. But did those pressures necessarily involve him ? Which was the most unlikely, likely, that it did involve him, that they took in a bit of literary observation on the side, or that with an operation going they didn't ? He should be so lucky. Either interpretation seemed equally absurd, that it was all innocent, that it was all sinister. Maybe it didn't have to be one or the other, maybe it was all chance, randomness, synchronicity, and the fishing club was just a fishing club, that never went fishing, most of the time.

If he asked what he was doing, the obvious answer was getting stoned. Life, be out of it. But beyond that, if he asked what beyond that he was doing, was there a beyond

that, did anything still residually shimmer, shudder, through the haze ? It was because he was out of it that he stayed out of it. The days of participation had passed, the days when you never asked what to do, when there was always something offering itself, when experience pressed against you, demanding take me, try me.

Now it had all dissolved. Now it was the desert and anything that presented itself a mirage. The parties went on, the books were launched and sank, the stars came and went, but this was a simulacrum of what it had once been. And being stoned only clarified the illusory nature of it all.

Opposition had lost all authenticity. There were protests but now as they watched them on the controlled news channels the only question was whose interests did they serve. Greenies put the local loggers out of business. That helped the multinationals buying cheaper from the third world. Scientists and media hirelings opposed hydro-electric schemes. That helped the multi-national oil companies. Footage of Tienanmen Square was re-run at any opportunity, but the massacres of South Korea and Thailand faded in an instant.

And a new blandness prevailed. The hardline reactionaries began to vanish from the screens and print too. Their day was over. Now it was a smiling complicit mediocrity that dominated, and any questioning of the order was blown away. It was small comfort that the explicit right was as overthrown as the left, but it was some comfort, and it clarified the picture. Now was the endlessly proclaimed age of beyond ideology, beyond history. Now the motivating ideas were truly repressed and the cultural artefacts drained of all significance except the denial of significance. Now was the era of whatever you say, say nothing. Now was the pluralism that prohibited all positions, everything was equal and equally discardable except the immovable status quo. Why wouldn't you want to get stoned, permanently, immovably, irretrievably ?

And if being stoned was to be controlled, better than being locked up. This was the new generation of weaponry, chemical warfare. The mysterious sicknesses of combatants in the Gulf war, whose chemical weapons were those ? The defoliants and other carcinogens of the Vietnam war had been an early trial run: and the heroin narcotization of the troops, was that an accidental factor not calculated for, or was that part of the plan too ? In civil life the mental hospitals had nearly all been closed and the patients tossed out onto the streets, loaded up with chemical substances, dosed to the eyeballs. That had been a huge silent revolution, the emptying of the hospitals, the totalisation of chemical control. The only reason it hadn't happened with the gaols was punishment still had to be seen to be done, incarceration was a symbol rather than a solution, and an expensive one. But dissidents, deviants, the oppositional class, what was done to them was best not seen to be done, what was

done to them was done silently and secretly, and what better solution there than large scale narcotisation, it was all part of the pattern of chemical control, the new generation of tactical weaponry, bring the war back home, whose slogan was that anyway, run in parallel with mass hypnotization by the electronic media; the principle of chemical warfare being that two separate substances were stored apart, but brought together they created the lethal reaction. And what more lethal reaction than dope and television, dope and the record industry, the super glue of social inertia ?

But how could he write about it, how could he find a fiction to express it that he could use with any confidence ? And if it was true, how would it ever be published? And if it were published, how would it ever survive ? And since nothing else he wrote now was getting published, why would this ? And when nothing was published it was hard to maintain the impetus to write. The motivations remained, it still was what he intended, but actually to get down to it, when nothing was appearing, when the stock pile sat there, that was the difficult part. It was easier just to have a smoke and think about it, float unresolved themes in the middle air and let them disperse unresolved.

On top of which was the pain. It took a long time to locate what it was, why less and less he felt like sitting at the keyboard, but the pain in his neck and arm and chest surfaced, from being a dull barely conscious presence it sharpened, it became an active discouragement. And the inevitable months of delaying doing anything about it, the fear. But the years of sitting there at the typewriter had left their mark, the pain from the neck down through the arm and across the pectoral muscle. It involved a battery of tests, x-rays, cat scans, and then the neck brace and the pills. How could you write in a neck brace ?

But more to the point, how could you write on the anti-inflammatories ? They left him totally spaced out, totally uncoordinated. He locked his keys in the car in town and had to spend a morning in cabs getting back home and breaking in and finding a second set and getting back. And one evening he just crashed to the ground, standing there talking one minute, and passed out on the floor the next.

'I'm laying off them,' he said to Barry. 'They're lethal. I'm all in favour of substance abuse but these things are unbelievable. They totally space you out.'

'I'll try them,' said Barry.

'You're joking.'

'No, I'd like to give them a go.'

Graham gave him the bottle. He preferred to stop sitting at his desk, stop writing, just get stoned in a manageable way.

He walked round to Barry's later in the week. Fo answered the door.

'Barry's in hospital,' he said.

'What happened ?'

'He just checked himself in.'

'Which hospital ?'

'Some private one.'

'Is he all right ?'

'He's fine. He just went strange.'

Fo carved him off a block and they sat and had a smoke.

'I hope it wasn't those tablets.'

'I think it might have been.'

They sat there in silent wonder. Stunned. But not as stunned as the rest of the world, blundering around out there, dosed up to the gills on prescription drugs, totally blasted and not aware of it.

They rolled another smoke. They felt moderate, restrained, responsible in an insane world.

Barry wrote off his car. Nodded off driving back from a long day on his plantation. The heat, the sun, exhaustion.

'And the rest,' Frend told Graham, round at Frend's, just the two of them. 'He was on the nod.'

'Stoned ?'

'Smack,' said Frend. 'Don't tell him I told you. He didn't want you to know. He thought you might disapprove of heroin.'

'Uh huh,' said Graham.

'That's why he'd been off the air. We'd do a bit when you weren't there.'

So there were levels to the fishing club he hadn't known about Beneath the surface there were other currents. It didn't especially surprise him. It explained certain things, the darkness round the edge, round the eyes, the inertness.

The seasons revolved. There were problems with the next crop. The seedlings grew to a certain height and then stopped, stunted. Barry considered the possibilities. Fungus in the trays; he scrubbed them, started afresh. But it happened again. Some were in black plastic pots, was that overheating the soil, cooking them ? But they weren't all in pots, and he'd used them before, anyway. Was the seed degenerating, did he need new seed input, probably, but where would he get that ? The other possibility was that the commercial potting mix formula had changed, they had added more peat so it held the water too much and the root systems rotted. Or had they added some substance

that inhibited home grown marijuana, some paraquat-style chemical ? There were reports of people getting legionnaires' disease from potting mix. And what, after all, did you get legionnaires' disease from, what chemical warfare project was that a side effect of ? So again it was a depleted crop. Not all the seedlings stunted. But he'd lost time by throwing out the first lot so he missed the optimum growing season. There was a crop, but it was a disappointing one.

'I'm going to have to do another trip.'

'You'd be mad,' said Graham.

'I'll be right.'

'It's not worth the risk.'

'There's no risk.'

'Well I'm not coming out to visit you in Long Bay if you get picked up.'

'I'm running out.'

Even with Frend and Fo cutting down consumption he was running out.

He floated the idea on and off through the next few months. They all thought it was a bad idea. Even Frend was prepared to have a break for a while. Give the lungs a rest. Detoxify. It was easier said than done, of course, easier said in theory than in any practice. But if the time of practice proved insupportable they could always look around for another source.

'I've done it before,' said Barry.

'That's why you won't do it again,' said Graham. 'They've only got to look at your passport. In fact they don't even have to do that. It's all computerized. It comes up on a screen, all your entries and departures.'

He didn't argue, just rolled another smoke and passed it across.

'We'll see.'

'You'll see in jail and it'll be too late.'

'I won't go to jail.'

'No ?'

'No,' said Barry. 'If I get caught I'll just skip bail.'

Frend and Fo began markedly distancing themselves. They dropped round less and less frequently.

'They've got another source,' said Barry. 'I know them, they're not cutting back, not that much, they couldn't. They're getting it somewhere else.'

In that case it was surely pointless to do another run, if they weren't buying any more. 'I'm happy to lay off for a while,' said Graham. 'If it's not there it'll give me a break. Get the THC out of my system.'

But Barry was determined. Was he trying to get Frend and Fo back, reunite the circle with some good quality stuff they couldn't refuse ? Or with Graham his best client, was he going to do the run especially to supply him ? What emotional craziness lay behind it all ? Was the whole transaction now permeated with psychological dependencies, the cohesion of the group ? Had the rationale of it all – making money, subsidizing his own smoking - got lost in the maintenance of the fishing club for its own sake, even though they no longer went fishing ? Was it the natural dynamics of dispersion that was dissolving the group and he wanted to resist that, keep it locked in a timeless stasis ? Or were there other forces at work ? With dope you never knew, you could only suspect. But you always did suspect. If you were wise.

'Would you feed the cat ?' Barry asked. 'Fo usually does it but he says he can't.'

He was less than keen.

'Otherwise I'll have to put her in a cattery and she really freaks out. I'll leave a stack of tins. You only need to do it once a day.'

Graham was reading the proofs of Sam's memoirs of a life of juvenile crime when they came round. He'd just got to the finale of Sam's confession to the police, when Frend and Fo were at the door. He invited them in.

'He doesn't know yet,' said Fo.

'What's that ?' said Graham.

'Barry was arrested. Coming through customs this morning.'

They sat down out the back, shaken.

'I told him it was idiocy,' said Frend.

'We all told him,' said Fo.

'I'm not going to get sucked into it,' said Frend. 'It's his own business. I told him it was a bad idea. I don't see why I should get sucked in.'

'It may not be up to you,' said Fo. 'It depends on what he tells them.'

'I might clean up the house,' said Graham.

'I got rid of my pipe,' said Fo. 'Things like that.'

Pipe, papers, seeds.

'How did you find out ?' said Graham.

'His solicitor phoned. He'll be phoning you. Barry gave him your name.'

'Just what I need,' said Graham. 'Why did he do that ?'

'Bail. He wants to raise bail.'

'How much ?'

'Twenty thousand.'

'Twenty thousand ? What was he carrying ?'

'Good question,' said Fo.

'That's a heavy bail,' said Frend.

'That's right,' said Fo. 'It doesn't sound good.'

'It sounds terrible,' said Graham.

'I've got his solicitor's number,' said Fo.

'I don't think I want to know about it.'

'If you don't phone him he'll phone you at work.'

It sounded like a threat.

'Or leave a message for you there.'

‘How much can you raise ?' Graham asked.

'I can't raise anything.'

'Nor me,' said Frend.

'I could probably raise a couple of thousand,' said Graham.

'That leaves eighteen,' said Fo.

'You can't raise anything ?'

'A thousand maybe.'

'I can't raise anything,' said Frend. 'I'm still skint from my case. Anyway I don't want to get sucked into it. It's his own stupid fault. I told him not to do it.'

'We all told him not to do it,' said Fo.

'So what happens ?' Graham asked.

'Search me.'

Fo came round again.

'Have you spoken to the solicitor.'

'No,' Graham said.

'He wants you to call him. I've got his number here.'

'I don't think I want to call him.'

They stood there in the doorway.

'If he can't get bail he just stays there in the remand centre.'

'How can we raise twenty thousand ?' said Graham. 'I'm willing to put in two, what about you ?'

'I'm broke,' said Fo, 'I can't raise anything.'

'Who else is there ?'

'That's the point, there isn't anyone else.'

'What about his family ?'

'They won't have anything to do with him. Not since the last time he got busted.'

'He'll probably skip bail anyway and we'll end up losing it all.'

They stood there, deadlocked.

He didn't like it. He didn't like the way he was being leaned on. He didn't want to be drawn into it. If the others had been willing to contribute he'd have put something into bail money. But they didn't want to be drawn into it either. They weren't willing to put anything in. They could all have borrowed something on credit card cash advance. But not twenty thousand.

And he didn't want his name mixed up in it. He didn't want to be recorded as a bail provider. He didn't want to speak to the solicitor. He didn't even want to think about the hidden depths of it all. But they could not be shut out.

Fo came round again. He'd been out to see Barry.

'He wants you to mortgage your house and raise bail that way.'

'Oh yes.'

'Otherwise he stays in there till the trial comes up.'

'And when's that ?'

'It could be months.'

Fo was shaking, his hands were visibly shaking.

Graham just stood there.

'Have you spoken to the solicitor yet ?'

'No,' said Graham.

'He wants you to call him.'

'I'd rather not.'

'They're talking about two years.'

'Two years.'

'He was carrying a lot. They work it out on how much you're carrying. That's what the solicitor reckons he's looking at.'

It could all have been natural craziness, Barry sending out messages of desperation from his remand cell.

'Why doesn't he sell off some of his stuff ?'

'He plans to. But he can't go bail for himself.'

That sounded even worse.

'What shall I tell him ?' said Fo.

'No,' said Graham. 'No way.'

Why was Fo running round with the solicitor's errands, leaning on him ? If he was so concerned, why didn't he raise the money himself. Or put together a syndicate, surely there would be enough people who could put it together, get Barry out so he could sell off some of his antiques and junk and cover some of it. But there was no move to do that. Instead there was this pressure on him to mortgage his house. Did Barry really think he would do that ? The only reason he'd ever bought instead of carrying on renting was a prevision of the years of repression, a prevision of pressures and purges, and he had decided he had to secure himself. And getting locked into this idiocy of Barry's, what better way to be destroyed ? If he mortgaged his house and put up the bail, didn't that look like being part of a conspiracy, a syndicate to import and distribute ? Why else imperil your only property ? Who believed in charity and loyalty and supporting friends in the legal system ? Maybe they thought they could use those pressures on him and then make it look like he was in partnership with Barry.

He didn't like any of it. Why had Barry done the run ? Frend and Fo had already markedly distanced themselves. And why had they done that ? Had they pulled back so when Barry got picked up, Graham would be the only one still dealing with him, the only one he could turn to, the only one who would feel an obligation to help him, particularly now the others had drifted away ?

Or was this all rationalizing his fear of involving himself ? Was this a way of not helping out a friend, by seeing it all as a set up ? How could it be a set up ? Would Barry willingly have done a run knowing he was going to be picked up ? Or maybe it was unwillingly, maybe they had something over him, he'd been busted before, maybe he had no choice. Or maybe he didn't know, maybe he really did believe he could do it again, and it was Frend and Fo who knew he couldn't, that was why they had been withdrawing, knowing what the scenario was. It sounded plausible, that was the trouble. And Fo's palpable anxiety, his trembling pressure to get him to phone the solicitor, locking him into it, suggested something.

When in doubt do nothing. He did nothing. He ignored the messages to phone the solicitor. He couldn't stop the messages coming, but if he didn't phone back it made the point he didn't see himself as involved in this imbroglio.

The fishing club had come to seem like a port in a storm, a withdrawal from the turbulences of the larger world. Now he began to wonder again if that hadn't all been an illusion. He began to run it through his head again. Instead of a retreat from the surveillance and control of the literary world, had it just been a safe house all along, safe in their terms, not his ? Had he just been a sitting target there, or a waiting one? And now the beaters were moving and they were ready to flush him out and take aim?

And all they had to do was stake out the house and pick him up feeding the cat. How could he deny all knowledge of it when he was round there every day opening a tin of cat food ? So where did you think he was for this period of time ? Are you asking us to believe he didn't tell you he was off to India ? Are you saying you didn't even ask, you just fed the cat out of Christian charity ?

And why had Fo not fed the cat this time, after all the other times ?

Barry had been so sure, so confident he wouldn't be picked up. But what had given him that confidence ? What were the layers that had been hidden ? If he was doing the run for himself, for his own supply, was he at the same time carrying for somebody else ? Was his confidence the confidence of a courier working for an organization ? And if it was an organization it would have police protection, customs clearance, and if it had police protection it would be easy to play another game; beneath the story of an antique buying holiday was his smuggling run, and beneath the story of his personal smuggling run was the organized courier run, and beneath the organized courier run was the set up, the arrangement that he would be picked up, despite his assurances, despite his confidence, was that how it went ? All so that Graham would be up to his neck in it ? Sometimes it seemed absurd, sometimes it seemed all too simple. It was the way Frend and Fo had withdrawn that worried him, the way they had been distancing themselves for the last two or three months, as if they knew, as if they had been told. Or was it just common sense, anyone would know Barry wouldn't get away with it, that the whole run was suicidal. And was it just that, a suicidal cry for help ? Where did conspiracy end and personal psychology begin ? Or were they always inseparable, the successful conspiracies incorporating the individual psychology of the players, no one being cast against character, this was the era of the soaps, they used actors who were the part they played, there was no need of dissimulation at that level, it was all type casting. All casting, all theatre, all simulacra.

Barry wrote a letter from the remand centre saying how all his friends had deserted and betrayed him and Graham was the only one he could turn to and if he didn't mortgage the house and raise bail to get him out he'd just rot in jail, etc. It ended up, so do the right thing. It was a slogan on all the litter bins. Dispose of litter thoughtfully, do the right thing. Graham couldn't work out whether it was a coded message saying, throw this away, I have to write this letter but disregard it, or whether it was the heavy demand it seemed to be. He took the coded interpretation anyway, and burned it.

The next day he saw Barry driving through the streets.

Graham never asked. What can you ask ? If Barry wanted to let him know he was sending a coded message, he would. If it was in code it would be for a reason, so why would he ever spell it out directly ? And if Graham asked, how would he know he was getting a straight answer ? How would he know Barry wasn't just saying yes to make it look good ?

The case came up a year or so later. Barry got a suspended sentence and some hours of community service.

Frend and Fo never came round again.

That was the end of the fishing club.

16. CREATIVE WRITING

He would wake in the morning and feel sick immediately, right across his diaphragm, along where the ribs end, that awful feeling of tension, and his fingers and ankles and such like, extremities, would be tingling, vibrating with referred nervous tension. If he had any dope he'd roll a joint and smoke it and that would relax it a bit. If he didn't, he'd run a bath. Either way he'd fill the kettle, boil water, make tea. Sometimes he'd drink it in the bath. Sometimes he'd smoke in the bath. Sometimes he'd drink and smoke. It was just fear. And it was every day. Everyday fear every day. Even the days when he wasn't teaching it was there, this fear, this fear of the familiar and expected, even the fear of the unexpected was the fear that there might be no unexpected, just the fear of not being able to endure, and the fear of always being able to endure, too fearful to do anything else. Campus fear. American fear.

'Just write a story,' he'd say, 'your first story, the first story you've ever written, or the first story you can remember, or the first story you want to remember, how it all got like this, or anything, whatever you like, whatever turns up.'

So easy. If it was so easy why was he here telling American students to do it and not doing it himself ?

'This isn't going to be how to write a bestseller. If I knew that I wouldn't be here, I'd be writing one, this isn't formula writing.'

But was that true ? Would he have been, formula writing, if he could, would that have been preferable to this ? Probably not. So what was it then ? Ah, what was it then ? He lay in the bath. Was it that he didn't know, or that some things could no longer be written ?

The first story that was read out was so good everybody clapped spontaneously.

Fear. How could he teach them anything when they were as good as that ?

He clapped, too.

'OK., next one.'

This was when she read. She'd sat herself at the front. His own policy was to lurk at the back. By the door. Ready to sidle out. He was sceptical of people who sat themselves at the front. Was that the word, sceptical ? Suspicious, maybe. Already he was losing words, hired to teach them writing and losing words.

Trouble, that was the word, there was no trouble over finding that one.

Again, though, was it the right one ? It was the word that came up straight away, fell into place immediately. First word, best word, wasn't that it ? No, that wasn't it. Not quite. And in the matter of words not quite meant not at all. First

thought best thought. That was it. I think. I think it was, he thought. That sense of trouble, that fear of trouble, was what first floated by, and hung there. Tall, dark, pale amongst all those suntanned blond girls. Chewing gum. Bubble bubble toil and trouble. You'd make this point, he'd make this point, a good point, and look up and there they would be, a roomful of them, blowing bubble gum. Splat, pop, plup.

'Professor, professor, how do you write the sound bubble gum makes when it bursts?'

All day long he could hear it.

Slup. Splut.

Day after day waking with fear and watching the bubble gum burst and he still didn't know how to make the sound. Write the sound.

And her legs crossed and her long dark skirt slit up the side dropping down to show that white leg, white thigh, that pallid white skin and ink black hair.

He didn't want any of it. Nothing. He wanted a quiet life. For a while. The reassembly of his scattered forces. The recovery from depletion. Here where the ocean fogs rolled in and the sun shone the rest of the time he wanted to be at peace, he wanted the fogs to come and wipe away the traces of whatever was left of whatever he was and maybe then start again or maybe not, rest and recreation, that was what he wanted, and mainly rest, and a joint would do for recreation.

She walked out to the front, willowy, languid, awkward, read her story.

> She was lost. She was in this strange place where nothing was familiar and the ocean fog rolled in and the sun shone the rest of the time. There was no one she knew except Julien and most of the time she didn't think she even knew him. She'd come here to escape and now she couldn't remember what from, this seemed so much of a trap.
>
> Julian said, 'We thought we were tunnelling into the bank and it turned out it was the gaol.' Then he laughed.
>
> She didn't think that was funny and said so.
>
> 'Oh, hun,' he said, 'why do you have to be such a downer ?'
>
> She didn't know why. It made her unhappy that she was. She wanted him to sweep her off her feet and whirl her round and give her, metaphorically speaking, chocolates and roses.
>
> But he just brought her real chocolates and roses and the chocolates made her fat and feel sick and the roses upset her sinuses and provoked an allergic reaction.
>
> 'Let's do something,' he said.
>
> 'Like what ?' she said.

'Well, we could –'

'Walk along the beach,' she said, along with him, parodying him in time with him and he hadn't even been quick enough to realize what she was doing, he just kept on and completed the sentence.

'Or we could go and get ice cream,' he said, carrying on.

'Or a coffee.'

'Sure, or a coffee, if you like,' he said.

'I don't like.'

'Or we could fuck,' he said, Julian's answer to everything.

'O. K., let's fuck,' she said.

They fucked.

She lay there as they fucked, her eyes open, looking at the ceiling, which was without pattern or design.

Julian came and went to sleep beside her. She put her arms round him because it was more comfortable that way than putting them behind her head or whatever.

How long, she wondered, do you have to stay lost before somebody finds you?

Again everybody clapped. This was going to be a problem. What happened when nobody clapped ? That could be a nightmare. Especially if it was when he read them something. That was his reserve strategy for when no one did an assignment, for when morale slumped midway through the course and nothing was delivered except mid-session papers for all their other courses, then he could read them something of his; maybe he wouldn't; maybe he'd read them something of Hemingway's.

She returned to her seat, those awful seats with a weird laminated timber attachment to write on, like a broken baby's high chair. Legs crossed, that dropping away of the split skirt and flash of thigh, head down.

'Yes,' he said, this was the recurring pressure point, formulate a response, encouraging, sensible, coherent, useful. Absorb, digest, consider, evaluate and praise the piece in this brief moment.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes. That's very good. Very good, I like the, well yes, the authenticity of it, it carries that weight of authenticity, it doesn't sound fabricated. And it's simple and direct. You can get very powerful effects from directness, and, and well, you can see from the response that it struck a chord.'

She kept her eyes down on the desk.

'Anybody else have anything to say ? Any reaction ?'

It always sounded desperate, that cry, a plea, help me out, say something.

No reactions.

'Somebody else ?' he asked.

Some people imprint themselves on you. Some make a point of it. Sitting there in the very front. And even though he'd put his own chair off to the side rather than dead centre and put whoever was reading in the centre, being in the front was being in the front. You couldn't miss somebody sitting in the front.

So he wasn't surprised to see her outside the class room the next class, sitting on one of the benches near the coffee hut, reading a book, holding a drink. Not right outside. But on the route there.

She looked up, smiled as he came by.

'Early,' she said.

Yes, he was, early and not surprised to see her, some stories don't need to be told, some things can remain unwritten, unread. He sat on the bench beside her, ripped open the sugar packets above his coffee, stirred the sugar in, his books on the bench beside him.

'You always carry books ?'

'Just in case.'

'In case of what ?'

'In case nobody has anything to read.'

'Oh,' she said.

Students were milling past them in the afternoon sun.

'You thought there was some other reason ?'

'No. Not really. Well, kind of.'

'Like what ?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Go on.'

'Well, I thought maybe since you were teaching us writing you felt maybe we should get into books, like an advertisement, a promotion, you know. Like why write if you're not going to read ? I mean, like nobody reads anything. This is California.'

'I know,' he said.

'It sucks.'

'What books are you carrying ?'

'Me ?' she said. 'Oh, I'm just like everyone else. I don't read. No one reads here. This is a party campus, you know that.'

'Well, it's a nice climate.'

'It's just brain death,' she said. 'Everyone's so lazy here. No one gives a shit.'

'Why did you come here ?'

'Oh, I don't give a shit either. I told you, I'm just like everyone else.'

Was she feeding him lines ? Was she ever. What was the preferred response ? 'No you're not.' ? But come on now, more creative than that, you're supposed to be a creative writing professor, you can do better than that.

'That was a good story you read,' he said.

'What, that ? Really ? No, that was a piece of crap.'

'No, really, it was very good.'

'What was good about it ?'

'It was real.'

'Real ?' she said. 'You didn't believe it. You didn't think that was me ? I'm so embarrassed. I was so embarrassed reading it. I don't want people thinking, oh she's just trash, you know.'

'I don't know whether it was real or not,' he said, 'but it came across as real. That's the important thing. It seemed authentic.'

'It seemed authentic, huh,' she said. 'Ah well, that's neat. Yeah, it was authentic. I guess. If that's what authentic is. Being full of shit. It certainly was authentically full of shit. If that means it was real, I guess it was real.'

'Have you read that Henry James' story "The Real Thing" ?'

'I haven't read anything, I told you,' she said. 'The real thing. I thought that was coke.'

'Henry James said it first.'

'I hope he copyrights it,' she said. 'It would be terrible to think up a phrase like the real thing and not to copyright it and to see it written up everywhere you went. That would make you feel kind of inauthentic, wouldn't it ? What a bummer.'

She finished off her soft drink.

'You're going to be late,' she said.

He gathered up his books, left his coffee half unfinished.

'Anyway,' he said, 'really, it was a good piece of writing.'

'Which was ? “The Real Thing" ?'

'Yes, that was too. But I meant yours.'

She laughed.

I was sitting in the departure lounge of this airport. I forget which. We were always in airports. We travelled a lot. We were travelling people. I used to sit there and look at people. I'd fantasize about them. That's what airports are about. Fantasies. People travelling in pursuit of their fantasies. Having

desperate conversations in telephones. Waving their arms. Flailing like they are drowning.
'Don't stare at people,' my mother would say.
'I'm not staring.'
'Darling,' she would say, she always said darling when she was feeling heavy, 'darling, I can see you are.'
'I'm not staring. I'm not even looking. I'm letting my eyes go out of focus so I don't see anything.'
'Darling, don't do that. It's bad for them.'
'How can it be bad for them.'
'It strains them.'
'Strains who ?'
'Your eyes, darling.'
'I thought you meant the people,' I said.
'What people ?'
'The people I'm not looking at.'
'You're an impossible child,' she said. She always said it. The phrase is tattooed on my eardrums. When I was in high school and all the bad girls talked about going down and getting tattoos on their you know wheres, or possibly you don't know, maybe you just have to imagine where, I said, 'I've already got one,' A tattoo.
'Oh yeah,' they'd say, 'where ? Show us.'
'You have to look into my ears,' I'd say. 'Deeper. Deep round the corner where you can't see. It has a secret message.'
That didn't impress them either. Nothing impressed them. Nor my mother.
'Why do you have to stare all the time ?'
'I'll shut my eyes and wear dark glasses,' I said.
'Can't you just be normal ?' she said.
'Give me five dollars,' I said. This was a long time ago. When I was little.
'What for ?' she said. She'd reached into her bag automatically, anything to buy peace, and then she'd checked herself.
'What for ?'
'I want to buy dark glasses so people don't see my eyes. Then you won't be able to say I'm staring at them.'
'You're an impossible child,' she said.
'I know,' I said. 'I think you mentioned it before.'
I wasn't fantasizing about the people, though. The people I wasn't looking at. I was fantasizing about me. I'm a child of the me generation in case you hadn't

noticed it. I would fantasize about what they were thinking about me. I'd sit there, in the international departure lounge, amongst the impossible children playing computer games that bipped and shrieked and howled, and I'd just look. Look at someone being body searched with the security guard's hand inside his crotch. Look at somebody looking at *Playboy*. Look at lonely men looking at every available chick, their eyes following along between the sheer lines of the ground hostesses' stockings. Why stick at ground hostesses ? What limited imagination. And then they'd see my eyes. That fixed look fixed on them. Then they'd stare back. And I'd read their fantasies in their eyeballs. Is she on my flight ? they'd ask, is she travelling first class, business class, club class ? Can I get her into the toilets, meet her back there in the galley, initiate her into the mile high club ?

Initiate her, I would snort. It was themselves they wanted to initiate. I was just the instrument of their pathetic fantasies. And I rather liked being that, being an instrument. Hanging around airport terminals there isn't a lot else to do. It's like hanging around campuses.

'Darling,' my mother would say, 'it will all change when you get older and go to college. You'll see.'

I did see. But she was wrong, as ever. It didn't change at all. Now I hang around lecture rooms, drinking the same bad coffee from the same plastic cups, and there isn't even any duty free shopping. And no one ever takes off. They're all grounded in the perpetual fog. And when the fog lifts, it's even worse. Because you realise there aren't any aircraft to take off in. So much for the mile high club.

At the end of the class she vanished. One minute he was sitting in a corner at the front, listening to a science fiction epic, the last man in space, waiting for a visitor, punching up simulations on the solar powered computer screen, invoking materializations of feminine forces, while the acrid metallic mist rolled round the crippled spacecraft, slowly pitting its surface, drilling little holes of corrosion long galactic day after long galactic day, and the screen forever promising, forever probing, forever isolating feminine particles and reassembling them there only to have them dissolved in a flurry of electronic disturbance, what was doing the disturbing, was he perhaps not the last man in space, was there perhaps some other lonely soul jamming the impulses, poaching on the created feminine, jealous, hostile, kidnapping each and every form in its pre-materialised essence; and then he was surrounded by a flurry of humanoid forms, will you sign this application to enrol, professor, professor, professor, this is my last chance, this is the last course I need,

would you let me in ? while the others who disenrolled just left, politely impolite, avoiding the embarrassment of announcing their intention to leave and transfer to oceanology, ecological sciences, golf, ceramics. And then the forms signed and the room empty, just the litter of plastic cups and crushed soft drink cans and scattered sheets of the campus daily paper washed up beneath the desks.

'Back from the coal face ?' said Frederick. They shared an office.

'The coal face ?' he said. White face, coal hair, but coal face ?

'Labouring in the deepest mines of knowledge ?'

'Oh no, not quite,' he said.

'Oh, I thought you were teaching.'

'Yes, writing. But not exactly mines of knowledge.'

'More the deep vacuities of the unborn and unformed. The pre-creative primal chaos, huh ? I think of it all as down at the coal face, myself.'

'It's not too bad, actually,' he said. 'They're doing some good work. They're nice kids.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Frederick.

'What ?'

'Any of it. They probably bought the good stuff ready made. Ready printed out.'

'Really ?'

'Yeah, really. It's a whole business. You can't even call it a black market, it's all up front. Free enterprise. The mighty dollar. The best that money can buy. Like J. F. Kennedy's dissertation. That's the education they get and those are the grades they're given.'

'You disillusion me.'

'No I don't. I shock you but you've still got your illusions. You figure it doesn't happen to you. Not to your class. Not to your nice kids. It's like death. It only happens to others.'

'They do seem nice kids.'

'They're not. They're a wheedling, manipulative, treacherous, duplicitous bunch of narcissistic brats.'

'Really ?'

'There you go again. Yeah, really. They sidle up to you and put on their charm. Smiles. Teeth. Body contact. They learn it at school. What they don't copy from their parents. They're told, make yourself known to your professor. Ingratiate

yourself. Smile. Show your smiling teeth. And when he's not looking, bite his balls off.'

'Oh,' Graham said. Don't overdo the same word, he'd told them in class. If you've used a word a couple of times in a page of dialogue, don't go using it again. Unless you want to get some particular effect.

'They'll stab you in the back and gun you down without blinking an eye. It's just grades they want. And not just any grades, it's an A. They're insulted if you give them anything less. They've been brought up rich and beautiful and privileged and they expect to stay that way. And boy, if you ever get in the way of that, will you ever know it.'

'Oh,' he said again. Now he'd have to think of another response.

'Don't be fooled by their smiling come-ons. Cupboard love. And they're the wolf in the kitchen. Never forget that. Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, you better be. They let you think you're the wolf, but you're not. You're just the sausage meat to their desires.'

'Hmmm,' Graham said.

'Sexual harassment,' said Frederick, 'that's the name of the game. Look 'em firmly in the eye, don't let your eyes even wander, and no staring, no offensive looking, no offensive body contact. You bump against them in the corridor trying to dodge a skateboard, unwelcome molestation. Why do you think everyone has their doors wide open when they have students in ? Just to prove Nothing Is Going On. Then of course you're wide-open for some random strafer, some psychotic with a Kalashnikov, some jock someone gave an F to who just passes and wastes you.

'And another thing,' said Frederick. 'I wouldn't sit with your chair like that and your back to the door. Not if you're going to have it open. And even if you have it closed I wouldn't. Never let them creep up on you, you know. Your only hope is to look 'em straight between the beady eyes. Like rattlesnakes. They're vicious. Don't ever underestimate their viciousness.'

'I won't,' said Graham.

'You will,' said Frederick. 'But don't say I didn't warn you.'

'All you've got to do is sit down and write. Just do it. That's the hardest bit, just doing it. Maybe have a regular time. You know, first thing in the morning. So it becomes a routine. A habit until it becomes too much of a habit. Then maybe you have to change it. Surprise yourself. So it doesn't become unthinking and unthought and a habit in the bad sense. The morning's good. Before your head is full of the clutter of the day. Maybe even before breakfast. It's like meditating. Like going to mass. Like taking

communion. Before your stomach's full and your brain's preoccupied with digesting. It gives you an edge. An urgency. Get your thousand words a day written and then you can eat. Keeps you going. Pushes you along. I find.'

No, why say what he found ? If you blithely reveal what you find, these are my working habits, who knows but somebody writes it down and reports it back and then, first thing every morning, before breakfast, when you're ready to write, the disruptions start and the day falls apart before it even begins.

'You can read *The Paris Review*, the Writers at Work interviews they've been collected in book form, they're interesting because one thing the interviewers always ask is about writing habits, and you find how people go about it, first thing in the morning, last thing at night, most of them seem to try and write in the morning, but not all, some have no pattern at all, or at least no pattern that they admit to.'

And maybe they were the smart ones. After all, before all, why did *The Paris Review* want to know about work habits ? What literary significance was there in that? Sure he found it interesting, sure anybody writing found it interesting, to see how everybody else went about it, but why did it matter otherwise, aren't there some things best not revealed ? All the interviews he used to give in the blithe and heady days. Opening up. Not being stiff and stuffy. Accessible. I have no secrets. And why would anyone want to know whether you wrote morning or midday or night, three hundred words a day or a thousand or two thousand or only on weekends or only in the week ? And do you still write to music ? How did they know he did write to music, to keep out the noise of the barking dogs, the neighbourhood kids, the man building the great wall of China across the road. What do you say? Now I try not to work to any pattern. Doesn't that reveal too much, isn't that inviting noise generators in the street twenty four hours a day instead of only before breakfast, walls of China built and rebuilt, taking it down on alternate days and rebuilding the same row or rocks day after day, and the roaming packs of dogs, did they really belong to the suburb or were they brought in in closed vans and let loose outside the house, Rossetti's suspicion, conviction, was that such a crazy idea, yes sure it was, but was it any less true ?

You start to narrate your personal experience and then you falter and retreat. Now it had become like that with writing, you start to put it down and then you pull back, no, some things can no longer be revealed, some things must remain unsaid, unwritten.

'Anyway,' and they sit there impassive and superior and young and bored, earrings swinging gently like hypnotizing pendulums, gum popping like the simmering surface of a volcanic lake, 'anyway, enough of just talking about it, let's hear what you've actually written, who's got something ?'

Back through the afternoon sun, gentle on the lawns and alien familiar eucalypts, gentle on the cyclists, no helicopters clattering over the horizon, no megaphone summoning up solidarity, no massed meetings, no riots, no sit-ins, no smoke-ins, no love-ins, just a gentle susurrus of footsteps from classroom to library, from library to car park, hardly anyone sitting out by the coffee hut, no one much sitting around, hanging out, everyone busily occupied or giving the impression they were, afternoon sunlight like the end of an era, walking down the last paths before the last goodbye. Graham sat in his office and looked out the window. Alternatively he could look at his bookshelf. His œuvre stacked there, multiples, overstocks, remainders, cancelled editions, waiting for good homes to go to, better than letting them be pulped into egg cartons. There was no sign of Frederick, no briefcase on his desk.

'Sometimes people can go a whole year sharing an office and never see each other,' Frederick had said. 'You never know whether the person you're sharing with has died or been fired or just walked out. Or is still there. And they never know about you, either.'

And no indications from Frederick's bookshelves, either. Three unused desk copies of unappetising anthologies, a signed copy of a book on bullfighting by a local author, 'to my good friend Frederico, a companion in the toril,' some corrected essays students had never returned to pick up.

He swung his swivel chair round and rested his heels on the desk. Maybe he should go and get a coffee. Maybe he could get the paper and look at the television progamme. But that would only raise false hopes that there might be something worth watching. Maybe he could just go home.

'If you cut off home, of course,' Frederick told him, 'they'll be sure to come and then they'll complain you weren't keeping office hours. "He wasn't there."' He did a whining, jeering voice, his tongue hanging out as he finished. 'Their favourite trick is to wait down the end of the corridor till they see you go and then rush down and knock. I've caught them out when I've forgotten something and had to come back. For a while I used to do dummy runs, feint departures, go down one set of stairs and cruise back up the other. But they get wise to it. Put it in the student handbook as a warning. So I gave up on that one.'

There was a knocking at the door and he swung his feet down.

'Come in.'

She was already in, his feet in mid-flight.

She looked round at the empty room, the bare walls, the metal bookshelves.

'Have a seat,' he said.

She looked round again, eyes at seat level, drew up a chair from against the wall.

'Am I the only person who's come ?' she said.

'Seems so,' he said. 'I wait here dutifully, but....'

'It's a real slack place,' she said.

'Oh well, I just assume no one's got any problems.'

She fumbled in the bag she carried, took out cigarettes, a lighter.

'You're too kind,' she said. 'You're too easy on us.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said. 'The work's pretty good.'

'It's not that good.'

She'd lit her cigarette, sucked in the smoke, blown it out, things to do, her hands firm, controlled, but with that over control that revealed the will there, the lack of free play.

'No, it's good. I was surprised. Relieved. Envious.'

'I shouldn't bitch other peoples' work,' she said. 'I know mine's shit.'

'No it's not,' he said.

There was a silence, nothing happening in the fading light.

'There are three people doing really good work. And you're one of them.'

'You're very nice,' she said, 'to say that.'

'It's true,' he said, he could feel himself getting exasperated, running through his thesaurus of the positive, she was making him sound like he was bullshitting and he wasn't, despite whatever other areas he might have in a past life, with her sitting there, what other corny, ingratiating, clichéd lines her presence was summoning up and he was trying to bundle back into the old wardrobe where he'd dumped them, not even folded them and sorted them out, too old and tired and stained to bear, couldn't face them, should have burned them with all the old correspondence, yet to have done that, or to have throw them out altogether, to have given them to charity for the homeless down on the beachfront to wear, would have been the surrender of a life, of a whole life up to now, in all its laboriously acquired rhetoric, clichéd and shrunk and moth-eaten and irreclaimable as it was, and he didn't want to have to front up and claim it either, it was part of the unsorted rummage of the past he couldn't persuade himself was worth the expenditure of the present to put in order, so he did nothing with it, nothing at all, just left it all in the stuffed wardrobes he kept his back to, never opened, filling up the space he didn't know what he would do with if he regained it, superfluous to the shrunk and constricted and reduced present he allowed himself.

'I always wanted to write,' she said. 'It was the one thing I always wanted to do from the time I was a little girl. But I never did.'

'Well, you are doing now.'

'Aw, but that's not writing, it's just –'

'What is it, then ?'

'I don't know. But it's not writing.'

'No, it's good,' he said. 'You should collect it.'

'Collect.' She laughed. 'There's nothing to collect. That's it. That's all there is.'

'Well.' He wasn't going to argue, get distracted on that one. 'Well, write more, write a sequence of –'

'Of getting laid.'

'I was going to say of being a female person today.'

'Aw well, same difference.'

He let that one pass.

'Anyway, I don't want to bore you.'

She started to move, made the moving motions, picked up her case from the floor.

'You're not boring me.'

'Yes I am. I bore everybody. I bore myself. I'm just stopping you doing things.'

'I'm not doing anything. I'm sitting here putting in my office hours waiting to see students.'

'And I'm you're only customer.'

'I'm glad you came.'

It put it in the past, concluded.

'Anyway,' he said, 'those stories, you really should think about writing a sequence of them.'

'You reckon ?'

'Absolutely.

'Absolutely.' She wrapped her lips around it, mocking.

'No, really. I think people would like them, you could see how the class liked them, recognized their own experience in them, it's hard to write naturally and honestly about those sorts of things.'

'Honestly ?' she said. 'They're not true, you know. You're not assuming they're true.' She looked at him through the blue smoke.

'Well, I don't know whether they're true or not, but they have the sound of truth. That's what matters.'

'Is it ?'

'For fiction, yes.'

'They've got to sound true but not be true.'

'They can be true. They don't have to not be true.'

'Even though they're fiction ?'

'That's why people write fiction.' he said. 'So no one's ever really sure whether it's true or not. It gives you a let out.'

She turned her eyes to his bookshelves.

'Is your fiction true ?'

'I'll give you some,' he said. 'You can work it out for yourself.'

'Aw shit,' she said. 'I wasn't fishing for a book, now you've made me embarrassed.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Take one anyway. That's what they're there for. To give to people. Help yourself.'

'I wouldn't know which to choose.'

'Take any.'

'I can't,' she said. 'It's too difficult.'

He got up and took a book off the shelf for her.

'Now you'll think I'm terrible,' she said. 'Coming in here to waste your time and angle for you to give me a book.'

'No I don't,' he said.

'I'm going to go before I do anything else terrible,' she said.

'No need.'

'No, I want to,' she said. 'I want to curl up and read this.'

There was a call for general mobilization. Some term like that, somewhat military, somewhat vague. Not exactly imprecise as that might imply there was a precision missed that could have been reached; and that was doubtful. Rather it was the vagueness of the engulfing wave that would suck back everything, encompass and absorb and surge forward.

It was like old times but it wasn't like them. Twenty years on and there was Abbie Hoffman still pounding the campuses, now it was Central America, but it was still U. S. Imperialism.

'How does he survive ?' Graham said, 'How come they haven't knocked him off if he's for real.'

Two years later he was indeed dead.

'When we started the movement you can imagine what it was like,' said Hoffman. 'We'd start off with these little cells and there'd be five FBI men and seven CIA agents and a couple of military intelligence and half a dozen paranoid schizophrenics and we tried to work democratically and discuss everything through and you can imagine what that was like.'

It sounded familiar. It sounded all right. But how come you could go round saying that sort of thing for twenty years ?

'Things have changed now, now you can use cheap air travel to get from group to group., that's what you've got to make use of, things have changed, now there's cheap air travel to get around on, make use of it.'

And the photographers who at first seemed to be photographing the star from long ago were behind him now and photographing the crowd, row upon row, systematically.

Sunny days in California, stalls of hot dogs and tacos and burritos and soft drinks and maybe a couple of thousand students, sitting out in the sun on the campus there, ranked up row behind row in the amphitheatre, and click, click, click went the cameras.

Old songs, a party in the evening, but Graham didn't go. 'Nothing's going to happen, nothing's going to change, they just wheel him out and follow him round and wait and see who turns up. It flushes out the young kids with commitment. And the old sentimentalists. And you're back on the files again.'

It was like a travelling circus. Friday there was a radical rock and roll group. Monday there was an ex-CIA man exposing the company. It covered the spectrum of radical possibility: rock and roll, nostalgia, would be activists, paranoid intellectuals. It was like a sweep of the campus. The following weekend they'd all moved down the coast, flushing out the dissidents as they went.

California mornings, fog hanging along the coastal strip, slowly dissipating in the wan, clear sun.

'Thank you for the book,' she said, walking along with him the last stretch of the walk to class. 'Were you trying to shock me or something ?'

'No,' he said, 'no, not at all.'

'Oh,' she said. 'I thought you might have been trying to shock me.'

Then it was a boy came to see him. Equal opportunity is official policy. Blond, leather-jacketed, cool.

'I just got two more courses to do, then I'm through, and I like took your writing course just to fill in, you know, but it's kind of neat, I'm really enjoying it. Are these all your books ?'

'Yes, some of them.'

'You must have been busy.'

'Once, I guess. It doesn't take that long. Once you get down to it.'

'You getting down to it now ?'

'Ah, now.' Graham laughed. Tried to, anyway. 'Well, I'm pretty busy teaching these courses.'

'So you don't get down to it.'

Why did he have to defend himself, prove to some apparent student whom he didn't know and might never see again that really he was writing hard ? Or why didn't he just automatically say he was in the beginning, replicate that American certainty, everybody always working, always producing, always fit ?

'Or don't you like to talk about it, is that it ? I can respect that.'

Well, maybe a bit of that too, maybe a bit of anything. Belatedly he took the offensive. 'What about you, how's the writing going ?'

'I got these ideas. I mean getting them down on paper is kind of difficult. But I got these things I would like to write about. You know, this place, there's some weird people around. Like really weird. Over in the village, you know, where the students live, you see the really spaced-out people. Like sixties people, you know what I mean? And you get talking to them, they tell you some amazing things. There's this one character, he's really weird. He used to do all these tests for the CIA. They used to hire these people and they'd check out all these different drugs. I mean sometimes they'd just use you as a control and give you a sugar pill or something. But most of the time you got to get some really heavy stuff. This guy reckons, you know, they were using him as a courier, they'd dose him up and tell him all this stuff and send him off somewhere, half-way round the world, and at the other end they'd give him some other drug or hypnotise him or something, he's kind of vague on the details, but he knows, or he says he knows something weird was happening, and then they'd get this information from him, kind of stuff that was too hot to send electronically because it can be picked up, like everybody listens to everybody else's signals, but you send some freak with a message locked in his brain, then it doesn't get picked up.'

'Yes, I had read something like that.'

'This isn't reading, this is the real thing, this guy's like walking round the village like a zombie, you know, but sometimes he gets flashes on this stuff and he tells us about it, it's really weird.'

'It's hard to write about that sort of thing,' Graham said. 'People just think you've flipped.'

'I guess so.' He had keen blue eyes, cold, hard, staring eyes set in that blond head. 'They were doing some experiments, too. They'd use microwaves or something, I couldn't understand the science of it, but they could create these sound hallucinations.'

'What are they ?'

'Well, you'd go in this room and it would be like Spring and there would be birds calling and waterfalls and all that, and then you'd cross to the other side of the room and it would be a totally different environment, like you were on a freeway.'

'And why would they do that ?'

'Gee, I don't know. Just to freak you out, I guess. So you'd be kind of disoriented.'

'I never heard of that,' said Graham. 'I'm not sure I really understand it.'

'I'm not sure I do either,' said the blond boy.

'Well, I've only just started this story. What I've got really is a sort of outline. It just needs filling in. That's all.' She laughed, that flat, west coast, urban laugh, humourless.

'So what it is, it starts off somewhere like this, you know, this sort of seedy classroom, creative-writing class, people sucking coffee and cocoa and rustling sandwich papers, and this girl develops this thing with the creative writing teacher and they run off together and she's rich and they just live in this place on the beach on her money and write, and they both write, and she gets very successful and he doesn't and he does more and more dope and they start to fall apart, you know, all that relationship falling apart number, we all know how to write that, and then he decides he's being a drag and gets really blasted, super dope, and walks off into the sea just as she gets the Pulitzer or something for her novel *The Waves* or maybe it'll have to be called *New Waves*, *New Waves for Old Waves*, anyway, you can just sketch in that, everybody knows how it goes, that's the plot but it's a bit of a downer so I've sort of more thought about it than written it.'

'Well, yes,' Graham said. 'All you've got to do is write it.'

'Yes, pretty much,' she said.

'You could have his life passing before his eyes as he drowns,' said the blond boy.

'That would be neat,' she said.

'Or maybe he swims out across the Pacific to an island and escapes,' said Graham. 'And survives and writes a book.'

END

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